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Vol. L.

BUCK TAYLOR THE SADDLE KING



OR, THE LASSO RANGERS' LEAGUE.

A Romance of Border Heroes of To-day.

BY COLONEL PRENTISS INGRAHAM,
AUTHOR OF "BUFFALO BILL'S BONANZA,"
"BUFFALO BILL'S GRIP," "WILD BILL,
THE PISTOL DEAD SHOT,"
ETC., ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE TIGER OF TEXAS.

"THERE'S a price on my head, pards, dead or alive, and I hain't afraid ter name the sum: Five thousand dollars! Who wants ther money?"

The speaker showed the desperado from head to foot, and the scene was a gambling saloon in a frontier Texas town, up toward the line of New Mexico.

It was a settlement on the northward and Rio Grande trails, and a worse element of humanity than were there gathered could not have been found in the Wild West.

The one who boldly asserted that there was a

BY
COL. PRENTISS INGRAHAM.

TIGER TOM WAS DRAGGED FROM HIS SADDLE WITH TERRIFIC FORCE. THE SADDLE KING WAS THE VICTOR!

price on his head, and defied any one to win it, was a man of giant stature, massively built, and with a face coarse, cunning and savage.

His hair was worn long, as was also his beard, and he was dressed in blue hunting-shirt, leather leggings, high boots and sombrero, while in his belt was a bowie-knife in front, and upon either hip a couple of revolvers.

He called himself a cattle-man, had a small ranch a day's journey from the settlement, and four times a year regularly had come in to have a spree.

Upon such occasions his desperate nature betrayed itself, and, inflamed by drink, he was a terror to even those who called themselves "bad men."

Whenever he drank deeply he would proclaim himself an outlaw and fling his defiance into the faces of the crowd, no matter how large a number were present.

Time and again his rivals had tempted some one to endeavor to win the price upon his head, and though they were "good men and true," the death of the bold adventurer was certain to follow, for Tiger Tom, as the rancher was called, was lightning on the draw and deadly in his aim.

Then, too, men avowed that it was useless to shoot at the "Tiger of Texas," as he liked to be known, as he bore a charmed life.

He had been gambling all the evening, had won heavily, drank deeply, and was in one of his "killing moods," as he called them, thirsting for a fight.

"I say, pards, I am an outlaw, a hunted man. Came to Texas to escape the gallows, and I am worth just five thousand dollars to the man that takes me in. The offer's squar', and Tiger Tom says so. Come! who'll make the bid for the reward? Don't all speak at once, but chip in, them as wants ther dust!"

As he spoke he drew a revolver in his right hand and held it above his head, while his eyes roamed over the crowd, taking in every movement, and waiting for some one to attempt to draw a weapon.

His eyes were ablaze, his nerves strung to their utmost tension, and truly he was a grand sight to thus fling a defiance in the teeth of two hundred men.

Just before he had risen from the gambling table a stranger had entered the large saloon and dropped into a seat near the door.

He was, in person, over six feet in height by several inches, with a slender form, but athletic, broad shoulders and the very *beau ideal* of a Texas cowboy.

He was dressed in somewhat gaudy attire, wore a watch and chain, diamond pin in his black scarf, representing a miniature spur, and upon the small finger of his right hand was a ring, the design being a horseshoe of rubies.

About his broad-brimmed, dove-colored sombrero was coiled a miniature lariat, so that the spur, horseshoe and lasso designated his calling.

In his belt were a handsome pair of revolvers and a bowie-knife, while upon a hook on one side hung a lariat of the very finest manufacture.

His face was one to remember when once seen, beardless, youthful, yet full of character, and fearlessness amounting to reckless daring.

His hair, worn long, and well cared for, hung below his shoulders in waving masses, giving him a look that one who was not a close observer might call effeminate.

When he had slipped into the seat at the table, as though to avoid attracting attention, those who had seen him showed no sign of recognition.

He was evidently a stranger in Trail Crossing, as the settlement was called.

When the Tiger of Texas arose in his might and flung his desperate challenge at the crowd, the young stranger asked of his nearest neighbor:

"Who is he?"

"The worst man in Texas, pard."

"What is his name?"

"Tiger Tom, they calls him."

"Is there really a price on his head?"

"I guesses so, or he wouldn't be fool enough to say it. He has done enough here ter hev' a dozen prices on his head."

"Then he really is a very bad man?"

"The wickedest in the deck."

"Why do not some of you get the reward?"

"Not for me, thank'ee, pard, for I has seen it tried on half a dozen times myself."

"And nobody has got it yet?"

"Nary, but they died with a sudden lossness of health, and Tiger Tom were the chief mourner at the'r funeral, for he buries his dead real handsome."

"That is some consolation to know, if he lays me out."

"What does yer mean, stranger pard?"

"Only that I intend ter get that reward," was the cool reply. The stranger rose to his feet as he spoke, to the evident consternation of the man to whom he was talking.

CHAPTER II.

THE LARIAT-THROWER.

THERE stood the Tiger of Texas, after uttering his last defiance, his right hand elevated

straight above his head, his revolver in it and pointing upward, ready to drop on the man who dared attempt to draw a weapon, and he seemed to see them all.

And, forty feet away, over by the door, the handsome young stranger had risen to his feet and seemed to be measuring the distance between him and Tiger Tom.

He also appeared to note the roving of the desperado's eyes, and when they had flashed upon him, and then across the room, quicker than a flash he acted, for his hand whirled around his head and in it was his coiled lasso.

A light swing-like jerk of the stranger's hand, and the lariat shot forth in a coil, the noose settling over the upraised arm of the Tiger of Texas, and being hauled taut with a force that dragged the desperado to the floor in a stunning fall.

With a bound like a panther upon its prey, the handsome stranger was upon the fallen desperado, a quick twist of his lariat had secured the ruffian's arms behind his back, and a slash of his knife cut the belt of arms, leaving the Tiger wholly at his mercy.

And all this was done in such a few seconds of time, that even the victim of the stranger's wonderful skill in lasso-throwing could hardly realize what had happened.

A moment of silence fell upon all; then, as the crowd realized what had happened, one shouted: "The Tiger's claws are clipped at last!"

There followed a burst of wild applause that nearly raised the roof of the shanty, and a perfect circle of humanity closed in around the young stranger.

The latter was in no way excited by his achievement, but with his foot holding the desperado down, and his lasso securing his arms, he stood gazing at him with a smile upon his fine face that wore an expression of amusement rather than triumph.

At last order was called for among the excited crowd, and a voice asked:

"Say, stranger pard, what might your name be?"

"My name is Buck Taylor," was the lasso-thrower's modest reply.

"Ha! Buck Taylor! The Saddle King of Texas!"

"We has heerd o' yer, pard!" cried one of the crowd, and a cheer followed the words:

"The Saddle King who clipped the Tiger's claws!"

Then came a growl from the giant desperado, as he lay upon the floor.

"Did yer say yer name were Buck Taylor?"

"Yes."

"Ther Saddle King?"

"That is a name my comrades give me."

"I knows yer."

"And I know you."

The man's face whitened still more as he heard this response uttered with significant emphasis.

But he gave a light laugh, and said:

"Waal, Buck Taylor, I allows I is floored and you is ther king bee o' ther hive."

"Jist undo yer lariat and let me up, and I'll stand drinks for ther crowd, for I ought ter, bein' as I has been roped in so clever."

"I shall not loosen my lasso until I have these on you, for, as I said, I know you," and quickly drawing a pair of steel manacles from his pocket, Buck Taylor slipped them with a sudden snap upon the wrists of the desperado, securing his hands thus behind his back.

Then he unloosened his lasso, coiled it and hung it upon the hook in his belt.

"Say, pard, this hain't a squar' deal, for I has owned up I was beat, and we stands for fair play here in Texas," Tiger Tom urged.

"You have had more fair play than you deserve, and as you have said there is a reward on your head, dead or alive, I want it!"

"I were jokin', fer yer don't think I'd be fool enough ter say sich a thing ef it were true."

"It will be a sad joke for you, Tiger Tom."

"See here, pards, you hain't ther men ter see a stranger chip in and use me like this, when I say I has got enough, and is willing to stand drinks and cigars all round?"

This appeal struck a few forcibly, for a drink and a cigar free was all that some of the gang were there for; so one looker-on known as Dead Beat Dick bristled up and said:

"See here, stranger, when a man's down we hain't ther ones ter see him kicked, so let up on him ef yer knows when yer is in good health. Hain't I talkin', pards?"

Fully a score of men asserted that Dead Beat Dick was talking, and they came the closer.

They saw a chance to make a little something out of Tiger Tom for rescuing him, and it was worth seeing how far at least they could play a bluff game upon the stranger.

He was too dangerous, from his appearance, for one man to bully, but a crowd made it different.

Dead Beat Dick felt that he had made a hit, and wishing to keep the ball rolling, he turned to those who had chimed in with him, when quick as a flash Buck Taylor's lariat fell over him, and he was jerked off of his feet and fell upon the form of Tiger Tom still lying at the feet of the Saddle King.

Then for the first time Buck Taylor dropped his hands upon his revolvers.

He did not draw them, but facing the crowd cried sternly:

"See here, men, I claim Tiger Tom as my game, and the reward upon his head as mine, and I do not intend to be bullied by any set of cut-throats into letting him go!"

There was something so utterly fearless in the mien of the Saddle King, as he stood facing the score of men who had followed the lead of Dead Beat Dick, that he won a cheer from the well disposed of the crowd, and a cheer was given him, while a gambler known as Monte Joe called out:

"You have won the game, pard, and I'll see that you rake in the gold, and there are men here to back up what I say—eh, boys?"

The yell that went up at this was answer enough in the affirmative, and the followers of Dead Beat Dick, who still lay upon the floor under the foot of Buck Taylor and upon Tiger Tom, slouched back out of the way, no longer anxious to have attention drawn to them.

CHAPTER III.

A FUGITIVE FROM JUSTICE.

"Now you I don't want," said Buck Taylor, as he removed his foot from Dead Beat Dick, and loosening his lasso from about him set him on his feet and sent him flying into the midst of the crowd, who shouted with laughter at the sorry figure cut by the would-be champion of Tiger Tom.

Then turning to the latter he bent over, and, heavy weight though he was, raised him to his feet, while he said:

"But you I do want, and you go with me."

"What?"

"To Fort Davis."

"What fer?"

"I said that I knew you!"

"Yes, but you don't!"

"You are a gambler, I believe?"

"I gambles some."

"I'll bet you a hundred to fifty I can call the turn on you."

"Done! jist let my hand free so I kin git my money out o' my pocket."

"No, I'll trust you for the money."

"Waal, who be I?"

"You said there was a reward of five thousand on your head."

"I was joking."

"You were not."

"Waal, I knows."

"There is a price on your head, and I shall get it; but, independent of that, I would have roped you in, as you are too dangerous a man to run at large."

"You is talkin' nonsense, Buck Taylor."

"Am I, Tom Trescott, deserter from the Fifth Cavalry United States Army?" was the quiet response.

All saw the livid hue that swept over the face of Tiger Tom, and heard a sound like a moan come from between his shut teeth.

"You lie! I am not Tom Trescott! I was never in the army."

"Indeed! Then what does that India ink mark on your wrist mean, 'T. T., Fifth Cavalry, U. S. A.'?"

"I saw it when you held your revolver over your head and knew you were the man I wanted."

"I say it is a lie! A pard o' mine put his name on my wrist as I put my name on his. His name was Tom Trescott, and he was in the army; but he is dead now."

"I'll take my chances in taking you in as Tom Trescott, deserter, robber and murderer! and we leave for Fort Davis to-morrow."

"Back, all of you! I know this man, and I shall kill him if you press me, and then fight it out with you!" cried Buck Taylor, in a tone that every man in his presence well realized was in deadly earnest.

The crowd, who had been backing Dead Beat Dick, had again shown a disposition to interfere, and they were pressing toward the prisoner as though to attempt a rescue when the words of Buck Taylor brought them to a sudden halt.

"Say, gents, are it lawful fer a stranger ter come inter Trail Crossing and cut such a high figger?" called out one of the crowd, and who appeared to have more grit in him than Dead Beat Dick had shown.

"I came here as a stranger and I saw this man fling a defiance at you all, with no one to take it up, so I clipped in, and having bagged my game, I don't intend you shall take it from me," and Buck Taylor stepped squarely in front of the menacing crowd.

"You talks big fer a feller as plays a lone hand, young man," said the man who had taken upon himself the leadership of the party.

"If you object, interfere, that is all," was the cool reply.

The man glanced back at his followers to see if they were ready to back him in what he did, and he seemed reassured by what he saw, for he said quickly:

"Come, let Tiger Tom go, or you answers ter me."

In an instant he was covered by Buck Taylor's

revolver, quicker than he thought a man could draw a weapon, and sharply came the words:

"And you answer to me! Do you wilt, or shall I touch trigger?"

"Quick! for life is too short to parley!"

"I knows jist when I has got enough, pard."

"I wilt!"

But the man made a signal as he spoke, for the crowd pressed closer and revolvers were drawn, and by the quickest of movements Buck Taylor whirled Tiger Tom in front of him, and with a revolver now in each hand, held on either side of his prisoner, said in a derisive tone:

"Now, gentlemen, to find my heart you must shoot through your pard's body."

"Say when, for I am ready!" and Buck Taylor smiled serenely.

"Say, pard! don't shoot! for the love o' Heaven, don't shoot!" lustily shouted the Tiger of Texas, who had been thus suddenly made a breastwork of to his own terror.

What the result would have been it is hard to say, had not Monte Joe the gambler just then come to the rescue with:

"Gentlemen, fair play say I, and the Saddle King shall have it, for he won his game squarely and shall have the stakes."

"Texans, who of you are with me in my little play?"

Monte Joe was well known all along the border as a man of iron nerve, liberal to a fault and one who hit what he aimed at.

He stepped to the side of Buck Taylor as he uttered the words, and faced the angry element that pressing the Saddle King to set Tiger Tom free.

His eyes met those of Mustang Dan, the man who had assumed the leadership of the rescuers, and the latter said, as he saw that the crowd was with the gambler:

"You hain't no right ter chip in here, Monte Joe."

"It is a right I take upon myself, for no plucky stranger like that one shall be set upon by a pack of cowardly coyotes who would not dare to meet him single-handed," was the quick retort.

"Waal, as yer has chipped in, and insulted me as well, we'll jist settle it as to whether that stranger walks off with Tiger Tom or not."

"Is that a challenge for me to fight you?"

"Ef yer c'd understand English yer'd know it were."

"I am willing and ready, Mustang Dan, so name your pard, and I'll name mine for the duel."

"Dead Beat Dick's my man, Monte Joe."

"And I shall ask the Saddle King to serve me."

"Pardon me, but this quarrel cannot be taken out of my hands, sir, though I thank you for your kindness in coming to my aid."

"My prisoner there is a fugitive from justice, and if that man considers him worth fighting for he must meet me—no one else," and Buck Taylor smiled as blandly as though he had made a very pleasing proposition.

CHAPTER IV.

A TEXAS DUEL.

"DOES yer mean you is ter meet me, stranger?" asked Mustang Dan, with a show of relief, for he knew what Monte Joe was with a revolver, and he did not know how well the Saddle King could shoot.

"I have no desire to meet you or any one else."

"This man is my prisoner, and I intend to take him with me, and as that gentleman was so kind as to come to my aid, I do not intend he shall risk his life to help me out while I look idly on, so if you wish to settle whether I lose or hold my man by a duel, all right."

A chorus of voices shouted out their approbation of this arrangement, and Monte Joe said:

"You have the call, pard, so I throw up my hand; but I'll see that you have a square deal, and no marked cards run in on you."

"How shall it be?"

"Let that man decide to suit himself and I am satisfied," was Buck Taylor's cool response.

"Well, as I stand for you, and I've had some experience in these little affairs, you being the challenged party, I shall decide how the game is to be played."

"Is that square, pard?" and Monte Joe appealed to the now intensely interested crowd.

A chorus of yells in the affirmative assured him, and Mustang Dan and his followers needed no more than this to see that they were greatly in the minority.

Up to this moment Tiger Tom had been a seemingly interested looker-on only; but now he spoke up, and to the point:

"Gents, all!"

An instant silence followed this appeal, for every man present congratulated himself upon having been called a "gent," whatever that might mean.

"It strikes me that this leetle matter c'd be settled more advantageous atween ther young feller thet calls himself ther Saddle King, and yours truly, I bein' most interested."

"That's so," shouted a number of voices, and thus encouraged, Tiger Tom continued:

"Now, I'm obliged ter Dead Beat Dick and

Mustang Dan, and ther others fer chippin' in ter help me out; but I wants no man ter fight my fights as long as I are able ter do it, so I says thet ef ther Saddle King kin settle whether I goes with him, or stays, by fightin' with Mustang Dan, let ther scrimmage be atween me and him, with knives or revolvers, as he may please."

A roar of applause greeted this suggestion of Tiger Tom, and put him at once again in favor with the crowd.

But Buck Taylor said:

"No, I shall not cheat the hangman of his due by killing you, for to Fort Davis you go with me, unless Mustang Dan there calls in my checks."

Tiger Tom looked disappointed, and Mustang Dan did not beam with smiles at the Saddle King's decision, while some one suggested to leave it to a vote of the crowd.

"I leave it to no one, if that man backs down from his challenge, for I seek no trouble," was the determined response of Buck Taylor.

"Gentlemen, the duel must decide it, and my friend is ready," called out Monte Joe.

Mustang Dan said something to Dead Beat Dick, in a low tone, and the latter came over to where the gambler stood, and said:

"Pard, I am ready ter arrange ther biz with yer."

"Back to back, step off at the word march, and wheel and fire at the word halt," was Monte Joe's business-like arrangement of the duel.

"Does that suit you, Dan?" Dead Beat Dick asked, with a glance at Buck Taylor, whom he did not care to be too near.

"It does," Mustang Dan replied, and something in the expression on his face caused Monte Joe to add:

"And I shall shoot the man dead who wheels or fires before the word halt!"

An applause followed this decision, and Monte Joe called out:

"And you are satisfied, Saddle King?"

"I could not be more pleased," was the reply, and he added:

"But I'll see that you don't skip while I am not watching you," and he sat Tiger Tom down on a bench with a force that made his teeth rattle, and with a few dextrous turns of his lasso, secured him there beyond escape.

"Now, sir, I am at your service," and he bowed politely to Monte Joe, who at once led him to a position in the center of the long room.

On either side now the crowd quickly formed, leaving the ends open for the bullets, should the shots miss, and a moment after Mustang Dan walked down to position.

"Don't shut off Tiger Tom's view, please," called out Buck Taylor, as he noticed that the followers of Mustang Dan were crowding around the bench on which he had tied the prisoner.

Many laughed at this, for they saw that the Saddle King's desire to give Tiger Tom a chance to witness the duel was that he should not be cut loose by his friends, and given a chance to skip.

So the bench was pulled up in front of the crowd, while Buck Taylor said pleasantly:

"It would be a shame to have the man most interested shut out from the fun."

The off-hand manner of the Saddle King somewhat dampened the spirits of Mustang Dan, who would have liked to have him show some trepidation, and not such utter indifference to danger.

"Back to back, gentlemen," ordered Monte Joe, and the Saddle King took position promptly, and Mustang Dan then stepped up and stood with his back to him.

"You know the terms, and you are not to draw until the word halt!"

"The man who plays false I trump with a bullet in his heart."

"Are you ready?"

Both responded in the affirmative, and then, amid the stillness of death that followed, came the command of Monte Joe, the gambler:

"March!"

They stepped off promptly together, no one knowing except Monte Joe how many steps were to be counted.

When each man had counted seven, loud rung out the command:

"Halt!"

Mustang Dan was noted as a lightning hand in drawing and firing, and therein lay his hope; but his weapon had just left his belt when the crack of the Saddle King's revolver was heard, and his bullet shattered the hand of his adversary, who heard the calmly uttered words of Buck Taylor:

"I did not wish to kill you; but don't forget that you wear my brand."

CHAPTER V.

A FRIEND IN NEED.

THAT Buck Taylor could shoot as well as he threw a lasso and rode a horse, his shot that shattered the hand of Mustang Dan gave thorough evidence.

The man was completely cowed by it, and was silent under the cutting words of the Saddle King, which gave him his life but left his brand upon him.

The act of Buck Taylor in sparing the life of the man showed that he was merciful, and he had wounded him simply to save himself, for all knew that there was no mercy in Mustang Dan's make-up.

"You are lightning with a revolver, Pard Taylor, and I congratulate you upon the best shot I ever saw under the circumstances."

"I am glad to know you, and when Monte Joe offers his hand in friendship, he means all that he says," and the gambler held forth his hand, which Buck Taylor shook warmly, while he said:

"I have to thank you, sir, for my life perhaps, for those fellows intended to corner me and rescue Tiger Tom."

"You have, indeed, stood my friend, and I appreciate it."

"What will you do now?"

"Get my prisoner to a room in the hotel, and then leave for the fort."

"You really believe him to be the deserter you spoke of?"

"I know it, sir," and Buck Taylor glanced quickly around to see that no one overheard him.

"I have been on his track for three months."

"Ah! then he is as good as hanged."

"About that, sir; but now let me thank you again, and say good-night, with the hope that we may meet again."

"I guess we will; but I will accompany you to the hotel, for it is better."

"I thank you," and going up to Tiger Tom, who was still bound by the lariat to the bench, and sat with morose mien and savage countenance, the Saddle King said:

"Now, Trescott, we will seek rest, for we start early in the morning."

"I told you that my name is not Trescott."

"Never mind, you remind me so much of Trescott that I can not help calling you by that name."

"I am ready now."

"You nearly killed my pard, Mustang Dan, for he'll lose his arm."

"He is in great luck not to lose his life," was the quiet response, and having unbound his prisoner, Buck Taylor turned to the crowd, who were watching him, many of them with admiration and a liking for his nerve and skill, and raising his sombrero, he said, pleasantly:

"I bid you good-night, gentlemen."

"Good-night, Saddle King," came in a roar of voices, while one said:

"Luck to you."

Then a voice called out:

"Come again when you want more of the same kind, for there are lots of Tiger Tom's style floating around Trail Crossing."

Out of the door went Buck Taylor and his prisoner, Monte Joe having previously slipped out to await his coming.

As he did so Dead Beat Dick and his followers crowded toward the door.

It was proof that they meant mischief, to try conclusions outside, and secure the prisoner, as there were full a score of them.

But the better element present at once saw their intention, the landlord of the place shouting out:

"None of that dirt shall be played on that man."

Then the crowd surged toward the door and Dead Beat Dick and his followers fell back sullenly, and soon after dropped out of the saloon one by one, for Mustang Dan accompanied by two pards had already departed in search of the doctor, for the bullet from the Saddle King's revolver had done ugly work, breaking the bone below the wrist.

The hotel was a shanty, only deserving the name through the fact that "lodgings and meals" were to be had there, such as they were.

Buck Taylor already had put up there upon his arrival, his horse being then in the stable, and receiving a room with two cots in it he went there with his prisoner, accompanied by Monte Joe.

Having seen his new-found friend to his quarters the gambler turned to go, when Tiger Tom growled:

"I'll remember you for this night's work, Monte Joe."

"All right, Tom, don't forget me."

"You played into this stranger's hand to-night ag'in' a friend."

"If trying to cheat me at cards, lying in wait to kill and rob me is friendship, then you are my friend, for I had always suspected you, Tiger Tom, but now I am sure that my suspicion was a correct one."

"The Saddle King has got you now, and if you do manage to escape the gallows and come back here, I will warn you now that it is to be war between us."

"And, Pard Taylor, let me warn you that you had better be on your guard until you get well out of Trail Crossing with your prisoner, for Dead Beat Dick has a bad following, and they are as treacherous as snakes."

"I thank you for your warning, Monte Joe, and shall be cautious."

With this the two parted with a shake of the hand, and then Buck Taylor bound his prisoner to the cot he was to sleep in, though not so as to

make him uncomfortable, and also turned in himself for the night.

It was just dawn when he awoke roused his prisoner, who was either sleeping, or pretending to be asleep, and then went to the hotel office.

The traps of Tiger Tom were secured, for he was stopping there, and his horse was in the stable so thither Buck Taylor went with his man when he had settled the score of each.

He had noted some ugly-faced men hanging about, and they too had gone toward the stable, and as the Saddle King approached, out stepped Monte Joe and greeted him.

"You see, Pard Taylor, a few of my friends concluded to set up and see you off, as we discovered others were going to do as much for you," and with a laugh Monte Joe motioned to the ugly looking gang whom Buck Taylor had seen hanging about.

"You are indeed a friend in need, Monte Joe, and I will not forget you."

"Well, be careful on your trail, for it's a long one you have to travel," and with this the gambler and his half-dozen pards waved a farewell as the Saddle King rode off with his prisoner, while those who had intended a rescue walked sullenly away.

CHAPTER VI.

TRUSTING A TRAITOR.

THE Saddle King had been content with ironing the prisoner's hands when he had him at Trail Crossing, but being of a merciful nature, as soon as they were off on the trail he had shown his utter fearlessness of the man and trust in himself, by taking the handcuff off of one wrist.

He had his weapons and so felt no dread of an escape.

Once, when the trail was a little rough, the horse of Tiger Tom had lagged back.

He seemed to be a well-trained animal, Buck Taylor noticed, minding every word and sign of his rider.

"I shall have to keep a close watch on that man," muttered the Saddle King, and he did so without appearing to.

The trail led over a ridge, which when crossed brought the leader into a narrow chasm where a horse could not readily turn for fully sixty feet.

This chasm, or split in the ridge Buck Taylor had entered, and just as Tiger Tom's horse neared it, the knees of his rider gave a pressure and like a pivot the splendid animal wheeled on his hind legs and darted away.

Over the ridge Buck Taylor was just in sight, and following down the winding trail he would have had to get within fifty feet to secure a shot at his man.

Then too he would have had to ride out of the split in the rocks, turn his horse and by the time he came back to where the prisoner had started from, the latter would have all of a hundred and fifty feet the start, and the winding trail preventing a shot for a mile or more, it would all depend upon the speed of the horses whether the fugitives could come out in the valley out of range of fire.

All this Tiger Tom had studied as he went along.

He knew the place well, for it was upon his trail to his ranch, and he determined to make a bold dash for freedom.

He had an idea that Buck Taylor did not wish to kill him, but carry him in alive, so would not fire on him if he could.

So his horse made the wheel for the liberty of his rider.

But the Saddle King was not caught napping, and as quickly as the horse of Tiger Tom wheeled, that quickly had his lariat, taken slyly in hand, been sent flying backward and the noose caught the steed at the very start around the neck, bringing him to a halt and choking him to a standstill.

At the same instant Buck Taylor had leaped from his saddle and sprung upon the ledge, and leaving his faithful and well-trained horse to hold the other animal, he had, with a bound, reached the side of Tiger Tom who, feeling that his horse was secured, had tried to escape on foot.

"Halt! hands up, Tiger, or I'll pull trigger!" cried the Saddle King.

Tiger Tom glanced back at his captor, and promptly obeyed ere he had run half a dozen paces.

"You're a quick one with a lariat, Buck Taylor, and hain't slow with a weepin' nuther," was the philosophical remark of the prisoner.

"Long experience in dealing with just such slippery rascals as you are, Tiger Tom, has taught me what I know," was the response.

"Come, yer hain't goin' ter put ther bracelets upon me ag'in?"

"I certainly am."

"Is yer so afeerd o' me, thet yer has ter iron me?"

"I am."

"Some day it will be my turn, Buck Taylor."

"Yes, every dog has his day," and the irons were slipped upon the wrists, the lasso taken from the neck of the prisoner's horse, and mounting, they rode on their way again, Tiger Tom now sullen and silent, where before he had been quite talkative.

The trail led down into a valley beyond, and

here a halt was made for rest and dinner, and beyond their way led over a ridge to prairie-land, dotted here and there with clumps of timber and crossed by an occasional stream.

Buck Taylor had purposely left the regular trail, not caring to risk an ambush from any of Tiger Tom's friends who had gone on ahead to be in wait for them, starting the night before.

He had seen a trail he did not like, and so branched off by a longer way.

As they got well out upon the prairie Buck Taylor came to a sudden halt.

His keen eyes had detected some moving object in a timber *motte* to the right.

"I say, Tiger Tom, we are well up toward the Comanche country and may have to run for it; but then you are mounted well and so am I, so if it comes to a race we need have no fear."

"If ye see Injuns, Pard Taylor, does yer intend ter let me be ironed so as I can't help myself?"

"No, if it comes to a close call, Tiger Tom, I shall set you free and give you your weapons to help defend yourself."

"Waal, you is generous hearted, and I thank you; but I does feel so awful skittish with them irons on me, I wish yer'd take 'em off."

"Wait a moment," and Buck Taylor's eyes were searching the timber *mottes* ahead.

At last he halted and said:

"There are Indians in the timber to the right and left of us and we must dash through."

"Why not go back, pard?"

"Because there are Indians following on our trail."

"Ther mischief there be! then we is done fer?"

"Oh no not yet; but I will take your irons off, and if it comes to fight I will give you your weapons."

"Now yer is a gent from 'Wayback, Pard Buck."

The Saddle King at once took the irons off of his prisoner, and then said:

"Now come, we must ride for our lives, and run the gantlet between the bands in the timber yonder."

Away the two horses bounded, Buck Taylor leading, the prisoner close behind.

As they did so a band of half-a-dozen red-skins darted out from each clump of timber to head them off, and a glance behind him showed the Saddle King that there was another party of braves pressing on in pursuit.

Instantly the Saddle King unslung his rifle and opened fire, as he ran, first on one side, then the other, his prisoner, as he thought, behind, following; but Tiger Tom had turned to the right-about and was flying back with all speed directly toward the pursuing Indians.

CHAPTER VII.

THE SADDLE KING'S DISCOVERY.

BUCK TAYLOR had a repeating-rifle, and he knew well how to use it.

His splendid horsemanship had won for him the title of the Saddle King of Texas, a State which has the best riders in the world, for they ride with grace as well as skill, when many riders who can stick on well, and ride hard and roughly, look awkward in the saddle, the English, German and French, for instance.

But Buck Taylor had won prize after prize for his horsemanship, and was daring to recklessness, as well as skillful in the saddle.

Feeling assured that Tiger Tom, knowing that he need expect no mercy from the Comanches if captured, would know that his present safety lay in sticking close to him and running the gantlet between the bands coming from the clumps of timber, the Saddle King momentarily dismissed the prisoner from his mind, and devoted his attention to the red-skins.

He fired as well from the saddle as from on foot, was not the man to throw away a shot, and so deliberately and with deadly aim opened upon his foes.

One shot to the band on the left, two to the one on the right, then a couple to the left and one on the right were fired with coolness and precision, six shots in all, and at long range.

Then the Saddle King brought his rifle down to note the effect of his fire.

He had spotted a white horse on the left and had hoped to bring him down and trip others over him as he fell.

He had been successful, for the white horse had gone down with his rider, and two men close upon his heels had taken a tumble over him.

On the right two shots had not been thrown away, long as was the range, for a horse had fallen and a rider had been knocked out of his saddle.

"Not so bad, that, Tiger Tom; but at closer range I will do better."

"When we get just between the bands, ride up to my side and I will give you your weapon to take care of the party on the left."

So said the Saddle King.

But no answer came, and then his ear detected no fall of hoofs close behind him.

Quickly he wheeled in his saddle to behold his prisoner two hundred yards away flying like the wind straight to the band of Indians in pursuit, and waving his sombrero wildly as he ran.

"Ha! he has proved traitor."

"I was a fool to trust him."

"It is taking big chances on my own escape, but I will risk a shot at him."

So saying the Saddle King wheeled, brought his horse to a halt and quickly leveling his rifle fired.

A shout of triumph broke from his lips as he saw the horse of the prisoner go down, and his rider fall heavily.

But at once he said:

"Poor horse! I hit you instead of your rider."

"Now to see if it is not poor Buck Taylor."

Again he wheeled in his flight, throwing cartridges into his rifle as he went along at terrific speed, for his splendid racer was now urged by the spurs to do his very best.

Buck Taylor realized that he had a desperate gantlet to run, rendered more so by his stopping for his shot at Tiger Tom.

But he nerved himself to his task and went along with his eyes roving from side to side, as he counted his chances of escape.

Then, as he got within closer range his rifle slowly went up to his right shoulder, for he meant to be deliberate.

A scattering of the band was at once seen, but he pumped out several shots, and again his wild cry rung out over the prairies.

Then up to his left shoulder went his rifle, for he fired from either shoulder, a feat few men can accomplish, and once again his war-cry was heard.

Another moment, as to his amazement the two bands slackened their pace, he shot through the gantlet.

A volley of firearms greeted him, one shot cutting through his sombrero, another striking his saddle-born and a third wounding his horse slightly in the neck.

But he was merciful, and as the Indians did not follow he did not fire again.

He was not a man to take life wantonly.

So he swept on out of their range and halted.

Dismounting, to give his horse a breathing spell at the stream, he took his handkerchief, bathed the slight wound in the animal's neck and bound it up.

Then he looked back over the prairie with the expression of one who was surprised.

There were the three band of Indians, gathered near the spot where he had last fired, and they were all in a group and in their midst was Tiger Tom, on foot.

Four horses lay dead upon the prairie, and two red-skins, while a third was lying near the group with several bending over him as though he was badly wounded.

This sight seemed to interest the Saddle King immensely, and taking from his saddle a small field glass he adjusted the focus and turned it upon the red-skins, who were about a score in number.

"Indians! Comanches!" he said in a decided way.

At last, after another long look he continued in a tone of derision:

"Indians! Comanches! and mounted upon American horses, not Indian ponies."

"Indians with no bows and arrows, Comanches without lances, and with no rifles only revolvers."

"A strange lot of Indians they are, for the face of every one of them would wash white."

"But they served their purpose, which was to rescue Tiger Tom."

"Yes, Dead Beat Dick and your pards, you have accomplished your purpose, that is certain — ah! binding Tiger Tom to a horse to still carry out your cheat, are you, and fool me!"

"Well, I am not so easily fooled as you think; but I shall allow you to think so," and with a light laugh Buck Taylor mounted his horse and rode away from the shelter of the willows on the banks of the little stream.

"I only wish I had known you were not Comanches sooner, and that you had no rifles, for I would have thinned out the population of Trail Crossing all in my power, but I was too busy to take particular notice until after we got through, old pard," and he patted his horse affectionately.

Then he broke out into a laugh as he continued:

"Now was I not cleverly tricked after all?"

"What will Monte Joe have to say, and the men at Trail Crossing, when Monte Joe goes back there?"

"He'll tell them that it was proven that he was not the man I claimed him to be."

"Well, I have set out upon the trail of Tom Trescott, and I shall go to the end of it."

"Now to head for Tiger Tom's Ranch and see how much of a cattle-man he is."

With this Buck Taylor held on until he was well out of sight of the band upon the prairie, which still remained where he had last seen them.

But suddenly he drew rein and turned back, riding to the first stream where he halted as though to camp for the night, for he staked his horse out to feed, and built a small fire to cook his venison and coffee.

Then he turned in for a sleep, and at dawn was in the saddle, going back over the trail he had come.

He had evidently changed his mind about going to Tiger Tom's ranch and was bent upon some other mission.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE PROOF.

WHEN he had had his breakfast and started upon the back trail, Buck Taylor rode with caution.

He had been reared upon the plains and had learned to trail from earliest boyhood, and to shoot, ride and throw a lasso also.

For months a boy captive among the Comanches he had learned much from them, so much in fact that he had managed to make his escape from them and bring with him a little girl of seven who was also their prisoner.

Thus by the roughest experience he had learned frontier wild life as he grew to manhood.

And when he towered above six feet by several inches, possessed the strength of a giant, and was as active as a panther he became a man to hold his own against odds which few would dare to risk.

So, as he rode along he was cautious not to run upon any ambush that might be set for him.

He was sure that the party who had rescued Tiger Tom from him were convinced that he believed them Indians, yet they might lie in wait for him in case he should return, and he avoided every clump of timber, and rise that he could, dreading a lurking foe there.

But he found none and went on his way back to where he had last seen the rescuers.

"As I thought," he muttered as he drew near the spot and beheld the numerous tracks.

"Yes, shod hoofs tell the story alone that they were not Indians."

Coming to where the three bands had met, he saw red stains upon the ground, and then the tracks all led in one direction, off toward the range of hills far away to the right.

He followed the trail slowly, for he did not wish to be too close upon the party.

"They are a dozen or so too many for me," he said, with a significant laugh.

At last the hills loomed up ahead, and he made a circuitous move not to follow the trail directly into them, for he did not know what he might find there.

He preferred to cross the trail up among the hills.

But he found no trail to cross, and therefore went down the range again until he could discover it.

It had evidently not crossed the range, but branched off to the right.

The Saddle King appeared to understand just why, for he went along quietly and soon saw where the trail turned, and from his position he could see that it again went over the prairie, but diverged from the one by which the party had come to the hills.

Right where the trail turned the party had halted and camped for the night.

And right there Buck Taylor dismounted, staked out his horse, and began work.

Over under a pine on the hillside, and upon the wavy bank of a rivulet, he beheld three graves.

They had been freshly made, and across them had been piled timber to keep the wolves from digging up the dead.

"One will tell the story, though I hardly need any better proof," he said aloud.

"It is a bad business this, opening a grave, but then I suppose I should do so to make a certainty doubly sure."

With this he removed the logs from one of the graves and began to throw out the loose earth with his large stirrup, which he took from the saddle for the purpose.

It was a tedious task, and not a pleasant one, when he recalled that his own hand had taken the life of the man in the grave.

Those who had buried him there had not slighted their work, for the grave was a deep one, and the others slain had been placed in separate resting-places.

So Buck Taylor dug on until at last he felt his hand touch a body.

It was enveloped in a blanket, bound around with a lariat.

Whatever those who had placed him there might be, they had at least shown respect to the dead, be his life ever so criminal.

Unwrapping the lariat and unfolding the blanket, Buck Taylor beheld the body before him.

The hands had been respectfully crossed, and the face washed of its red paint, for it was a white man.

"I remember him—he was one of Dead Beat Dick's band at the saloon the night before last."

"He played Injun once too often, and if Tiger Tom got free, it cost three lives to rescue him."

"Well, I have nothing against him now, poor fellow, so I will bury him again as I found him, though I doubt if he would do as much for me."

"How quickly death changes one's enmity toward a man."

"Now, alive, I would kill this poor fellow, as

he would me; but dead! well, that alters the case, and I—respect him."

So moralizing, the Saddle King began to unfold the body in the blanket again, when he stopped suddenly.

His eyes became riveted upon the palm of the left hand of the corpse.

There, pricked in most skillfully, was a star of five points, the Texas star, in blue India ink, while in the center was a tiger, stripes and all, done by a master hand.

Nor was this all, for in the five points of the star were the letters:

T. J. G. E. R.

Around the base of the points near the lettering, in a circle, the words:

"Of Texas."

"Well!" and the word broke very forcibly from the lips of the Saddle King.

"The five point star of Texas; then the tiger, and the lettering! All reads as plain as the nose on a Jew's face!"

"'Tiger of Texas,' and more; it means that this man is one of a band, or I am mistaken. But, I am in no hurry, so I'll see if the others are branded as this one is. If so, the live ones who wear the brand are my cattle, for it implies a great deal."

He did not then bury the body he had exhumed, but went to work throwing the timber off the other graves.

The two occupants were enveloped in a blanket each, and wrapped by a lariat, as the other had been.

They were white men, also, giving proof positive to the Saddle King that the whole rescuing party were pale-faces, and not Comanches, as they had wished him to believe.

CHAPTER IX.

THE BRANDED HANDS.

THE Saddle King worked with a will, like one who expected big results when his task was accomplished.

But, it was no easy work to dig the earth from the three graves, as he had to do, for the men who buried the dead had put it in solidly.

His task was completed at last, and he had the other two bodies unwrapped before him.

Then he took up the right hand of one.

An attempt had been made to wash it, as a preparation for burial; but it was unsuccessful in eradicating the marks, if that was the object, for the dirt was of long standing and the man had been a stranger to soap for many a long week, if appearances spoke for anything.

Then Buck Taylor took up the left hand, and then, through the vista of dirt, was seen the blue star, the tiger and the lettering.

The face, too, the Saddle King remembered to have seen at the saloon two night before, and among those had been Mustang Dan's backers.

"Now for number three," mused Buck Taylor, as he turned the dead body.

One touch of the hand, which was small, delicate and clean, the nails being neatly cared for, and the face of the Saddle King blanched white, while from his lips broke the startling words:

"Great God! he lives! This man has been buried alive!"

Instantly he dropped his head upon the breast of the man and listened with his ear pressed close to his heart.

"It beats faintly! The man is alive!"

"Now to see where he is wounded!"

There was a wound in the head, the bullet having entered at one side.

Down to the brook sprung the Saddle King, filling his sombrero with water, and quickly he bathed the wound and the face.

Then he rubbed the pulseless hands and limbs, and poured from a small flask he carried, and from which no drink had been taken, some liquor into the mouth, and bathed his face with it as well.

It was a long task, but at last respiration began, at first in gasps, then slowly, and with more regularity, until the warm blood began to course through the veins and life came swinging back into the body which had been, some hours before, placed in the grave as dead.

Raising in his arms the form, as tenderly as though he had been an infant, the Saddle King bore it away from the sight of the other bodies and placed it upon his own blanket.

He was all tenderness, now, this strong, nery man who held no fear and would kill a foe without mercy.

He had a big heart and it was in the right place!

He was revealing now that human nature governed him by his treatment of this enemy who had sought his life in his strength, and now in his weakness appealed to his mercy.

He arranged the blankets for him, gave him another swallow of liquor, and sat clasping his hands for full an hour.

At last the eyes opened slowly and looked squarely up into the skies.

Buck Taylor spoke in a low, gentle voice:

"You are all right now, pard, so have no fear."

The eyes closed again, and it seemed an age before they were reopened; but at last the lids

parted and the eyes were fixed upon the face of the Saddle King.

"Well, pard, you are better, I am glad to see."

There was no start of surprise, no recognition, no reply, but the eyes looked steadily into those of the Saddle King, who again spoke:

"You got a wound in your head, but I have not examined it closely. May I do so now?"

Still no reply, and taking silence as consent, Buck Taylor turned the head upon one side and critically examined the wound.

The bullet had torn along the side of the skull, just over and beyond the left ear, fracturing the bone, but not penetrating to the brain.

"I don't think it is so bad as I first believed. I will do all I can for you, pard, and then take you to where you will be cared for," and, as the Saddle King spoke, he went to his saddle and took from the pocket several handkerchiefs along with a bottle of witch hazel, and saturating the cloths, bound them firmly upon the wound.

"We cowboys have to be our own doctors, you know, pard, so I go prepared for shots and bruises."

"Now take a nap while I get ready for the trail, for it's forty long miles to where I shall take you; but there you'll find a doctor, and good quarters, so cheer up."

Still no reply, no sign of recognition; so the Saddle King went back up the hill to the graves, bound up the remaining body in its blanket, as he had the others, and placed each in its grave.

Then he worked hard and rapidly, filled in the graves, replaced the timbers upon them, over the empty one as over the others that held bodies, and going to his horse, saddled and bridled him.

The blanket taken from about the man who had been buried alive, he took, as also the lariat, and adjusting his stirrups, once more he led the horse up to where the wounded man lay.

His eyes were open, and roving about in a listless way.

"Come, pard, we will take the trail now. Let me help you."

He aided the man to rise, and yet no word came from him.

Then seeing how weak he was, Taylor raised him bodily and placed him in his saddle, wrapping his blankets about him as a support, and fastening them with the lariat.

"Now we are ready, pard," he said in his kindly way, taking his hand to place the rein in it.

As he did so, a quick glance at the palm of his left hand showed him that the hand of the Star and Tiger was there also!

CHAPTER X.

THE COWBOY SAMARITAN.

DOWN the trail went the Saddle King on foot, his horse following with the wounded man, silent as a Sphinx, and seeming yet not to be in suffering.

Reaching the valley at the base of the foothills, Buck Taylor skirted the range, keeping up his steady walk for a couple of hours, his horse following patiently.

Several times had Buck Taylor spoken to the wounded man, but each time he had received no reply.

It did not anger him, for something told him that the blow he had received was a severe one, and that it might have dazed him utterly.

Still he was determined to keep his eye upon him, for the man might be playing a part, and only watching a chance to escape.

Turning to look at him from time to time he met that same stony stare which looked at him yet appeared not to see him.

At length he halted for rest and food, and again spread his blankets for his wounded prisoner, if he could regard him in that light.

He placed the form upon them, bathed his head and saturated the cloth once more with witch hazel after which he bound the wound up as before.

Then he built a fire and cooked dinner.

The wounded man was given the best the cowboy had, but cared for nothing except a cup of coffee which he drank ravenously.

Once more then the Saddle King started upon his journey, for he was anxious to get the man under the care of a skilled physician as soon as was possible to do so, and having to walk the distance himself he knew that it would take him all night to make the journey.

He had regarded the wounded man attentively as he lay upon the blankets.

What he saw was a young man, scarcely over twenty he seemed, with a face cast in a refined and handsome mold.

His hair was black and hung in curls below his shoulders about his neck.

His form was slender, graceful and wiry, and clad in a suit of corduroy, sack coat, and the pants stuck in boots the tops of which came above the knees.

His eyes were large, but now almost expressionless, and under different circumstances the Saddle King would have called him a very handsome young man.

It seemed that he had met him before, but though he had recalled the two behind with him

as having been seen by him at the gambling saloon at Trail Crossing, he did not remember the face of the one who was now so utterly helpless in his hands.

The feet and hands of the young man were small and shapely, and he wore about his neck a silk handkerchief, and his coat buttoned closely up.

His weapons were gone, and he had evidently been hastily wrapped in his blanket and buried, his comrades taking only his arms.

Such was the individual now thrown upon the mercy of the Saddle King in so strange a manner, and the one who was now as gentle to him as he would have been to a woman, muttered as he trudged along:

"It was a sad day for you, my young pard, when you left the shelter of your home and came West.

"Well, I only hope you will get well, and maybe I can convince you that you and I ought to be pards, not you and those cut-throats that follow Tiger Tom's lead.

"And that reminds me that I am fully convinced that Tiger Tom is the leader of an outlaw band.

"Well, it will be pleasant duty to find out, for as I have set out on Tiger Tom's trail, I'll see the end of it."

Just at dark another halt was made, and the wounded man was given an hour's rest, while his wound was again dressed most tenderly.

Still not a word did he utter, no reply would he make to any question, only the deathlike stare which he had had since the Saddle King had first seen him open his eyes.

"I only hope you are not playing a part, pard, for I would hate to have to wing you, as perhaps you may reform from your evil ways.

"But I warn you that I will stand no monkey-business if you go to skip away from me in the darkness."

But if the man heard and understood, he played his part to perfection, for not an expression on his face revealed the fact that he was conscious of the threat made by the Saddle King.

Thus on through the night, with several halts, the Saddle King made his way.

At each halting-place he had moistened the wound, given the man a rest of some little time, and done all in his power to make him comfortable.

Twice he had made coffee for him, and each time it had been swallowed with the greatest relish, though food he would not take.

The last part of the way lay over prairie lands, and as the dawn drew near, afar off was visible a twinkling light.

"Yonder is where we halt, pard, where you see that light," said Buck Taylor.

But still no reply from the wounded man.

The dawn came and revealed a beautiful rolling prairie for miles around, which was broken a couple of miles ahead by a slight ridge, heavily timbered, and along the base of which ran one of those crystal streams which so often break the landscape of Texas scenery.

Upon the ridge some daring settler had pitched his tent, or in other words had established his home.

It was a commodious structure of logs, containing half a score of rooms and completely surrounded by a shed, which served as a piazza.

It was fenced in, with a garden in the rear, extensive outbuildings, some cornfields over on the slope, and prairie pasture lands for miles around, and whereon many cattle were grazing, with also a large herd of ponies and a flock of sheep.

It was a perfect border home, luxurious for that far land, and its owner had dared settle down where at any moment a band of Comanches might make a dash upon him, or what was equally to be dreaded, lawless raiders from across the Rio Grande might be tempted to loot his hacienda.

"There you will be welcome, pard, I will vouch for it," said the Saddle King as he waved his hat to a party of cowboys who were coming to meet him.

CHAPTER XI.

SOLDIERS RETREAT RANCH.

SOLDIERS RETREAT RANCH was one of the finest and most hospitable homes on the Texas frontier.

"Captain" Ned Hassan, as he was more generally called, had been a surgeon in the United States Army, stationed at a fort on the Rio Grande, and had been with his troop of cavalry when they had rescued from an outlaw band a beautiful Mexican girl captured and held for ransom.

It was Surgeon Hassan's pleasing duty to escort Marion Inglis to her father's home across the Rio Grande, and the friendship thus begun ended in her becoming Mrs. Hassan in less than a year after.

As her father had left her a goodly number of cattle, and Surgeon Hassan did not care to make a Mexican of himself, though he had been most willing to have a fair Mexican turn American, he had resigned from the army and established for himself a home in Texas.

It was upon the very spot where the rescue of Marion Inglis had taken place, and he had at that time remarked if ever he had a ranch, that would be where he would pitch his tent.

A number of cavalry whose term of enlistment had expired, were easily persuaded to turn from the blue to the buckskin, the sword to the lariat, and become cowboys at "Soldier's Retreat," as the doctor had named his ranch.

And here had Ned Hassan made his home with his beautiful wife, half a dozen peon servants who had followed their loved young mistress from the Mexican hacienda to Texas, and a score of gallant ex-cavalrymen metamorphosed into Texan cowboys.

The danger of the site of Soldier's Retreat caused the surgeon to organize his men into rangers, for protection, and the cowboys of several other ranches, distant far from Soldier's Retreat, joined the band, which at once became known as Captain Hassan's Minute-men.

A gallant lot they were, too, as they had shown in a number of hot fights with Comanches and lawless invaders of Texan soil from Mexico.

A perfect soldier, a genial gentleman and hospitable host, Captain Hassan was known and respected far and wide, and never did he fail to answer a call for his services as a physician, no matter what the hardship of his going would be.

A child, a little daughter, had been born to them after the captain and his wife moved to Soldier's Retreat.

The little Belle was at once taken in charge by her father, to make a "prairie girl" out of her, as he expressed it.

His training outdoors, with her mother's training within, promised to make an accomplished lady as well as a heroine out of the little daughter.

But a chance for her to become a heroine came sooner than her devoted parents could wish, for one night, in the absence of Captain Hassan, with his "Minute-men in Buckskin," after Comanches, a straggling band on the retreat swept by Soldier's Retreat, and wholesale destruction and death would have been the result, but for a dash of gallant settlers who charged in upon the Indians, and put them to flight.

While some of the party pressed the Comanches the others remained to put out the burning house and care for Mrs. Hassan who had been prostrated by the shock, for several of the servants had been slain before her eyes.

When at last Marion Hassan returned to consciousness her first call was for her child, her beautiful daughter then in her eighth year.

No one had seen her, and soon the terrible truth was forced upon the mother that little Belle had been either killed or captured by the red-skins.

The fire had been put out, the house had been saved, and it was found that the Indians had been driven off before much damage had been done, other than the death of several of the servants and the capture of little Belle.

But what was the loss of wealth in comparison to the loss of her child, said the poor mother, and she urged the band of settlers to push on in hot pursuit, and couriers to be sent in search of her husband.

The gallant men dashed away in the darkness, and when dawn came they were seen returning, slowly and laden down with their dead and wounded comrades.

The Comanches had met another band, and ambushing their prisoners had made them pay dearly for their following them.

Nor was this all, for they had discovered that little Belle was a captive, a prisoner left for dead by the red-skins had told them this, and more, the one boy in their party, Buck Taylor the "Wild Rider," had also been captured, perhaps killed.

Then in his fifteenth year, Buck Taylor was also known as a Boy Ranger, and never could a band go off on a wild chase or Indian hunt, that he was not along, so it was a bitter blow to the settler band to feel that they had lost their young pard.

Back to his desolate home came Captain Hassan and his rangers, and at once started upon the trail of the retreating Comanches.

He was reinforced by a number of settlers and cowboys from other ranches, and they pressed on clear into the Indian country in their pursuit, but were beaten back by an overwhelming force of Comanches, while a wounded warrior whom they took prisoner told the father that all the captives had been drowned while crossing the river, which was swollen by a freshet, and among them little Belle and Wild Rider Buck.

"It is better so," moaned Captain Hassan, and the retreat was begun to the ranch, once so happy a home, but over which now a deep shadow had fallen.

And mourning their daughter as dead, what was the joy of the parents to see ride up one day a youth on horseback, accompanied by little Belle Hassan, the two dressed in Indian togs.

The youth was Buck Taylor, and the daring lad had not only made his escape from the Comanches, but brought Belle with him.

Was it a wonder that ever after Buck Taylor was a welcome guest at Soldier's Retreat, and that though long years had passed since then he

knew that the wounded man, outlaw though he was, whom he carried there, would be most tenderly cared for by Captain Hassan and his family?

CHAPTER XII.

BUCK TAYLOR'S MISSION.

THE cowboys greeted Buck Taylor, as he came across the prairie with a cheer of welcome, for all knew what his courage was, and acknowledged his superior skill as a prairieman.

"What have you there, Saddle King?" asked one, as he saw his greeting to the wounded man was not returned.

"A poor fellow who has been wounded, and I am hastening on to have the captain try his surgical skill upon him, so pardon me if I push ahead," responded Buck.

So on he went while the cowboys returned to their duties, discussing the coming of the Saddle King and convinced that he could tell them much more about the silent stranger if he had cared to do so.

Upon his piazza sat Captain Hassan, awaiting the coming of his wife and daughter to go in to breakfast.

He was a handsome man of soldierly form, bearded face and with a bright eye that looked straight into your own, as only an honest man's can do.

He spied Buck Taylor afar off, took a glass from a bracket and turning it upon him said in a tone of pleasure.

"It is the Saddle King and on foot! And he has a comrade with him who rides his horse.

"They come slowly for men whom a good breakfast awaits, but his friend must be wounded from the way they come."

Then seeing the cowboys gallop toward him he said with more impatience:

"The boys will detain him I fear, for they must know all that he can tell.

"No, he comes on with only a short delay."

Stepping inside of the hall he called out:

"Marion! Belle! there is an old friend coming across the prairie, so be ready to welcome him."

"And, he has a pard with him too," he added as he returned to the piazza.

Across the stream came Buck and his wounded companion, up the rise to the gate, which a peon threw open for him, and as he reached the rack where horses were hitched, Captain Hassan met him.

"Buck, I am most glad to see you, for you have given us the go-by for several months."

"And I am glad to get here Captain Hassan, for I have hoofed it since noon yesterday, coming from up in the Blue Range country."

"You look haggard and tired, but I'll soon freshen you up—oh! your comrade appears to be wounded."

"He is, sir, and I brought him here to you, thinking you would care for him."

"With all my heart, Buck!

"Come, my friend, you are welcome here, and I will soon bring you round all right."

The captain caught Buck's significant look, as the latter said:

"I thought you would give him the little room off your little office there in the yard, and he will need some one to care for him, sir."

"Old Lulu, my wife's old peon's nurse, is the best one in the world."

"Come, we will go to the cabin at once."

Tenderly Buck took the wounded man from his saddle and half-carried him to the little cabin of two rooms, which stood apart from the main house, and was known as the "office."

Captain Hassan at once sent for Lulu the peon nurse, and the stranger was soon placed upon a bed and a dose of medicine administered.

"I will look at your wound presently, sir," he said, as he left him in the care of Lulu, who seemed to know just what to do.

But the stranger vouchsafed no reply, and as the captain and Buck left the cabin together the latter said:

"What do you think of him, sir?"

"Mad as a March hare."

"You think so, sir?"

"Did you not notice his eyes?"

"Yes, captain, but might he not be playing possum?"

"Not he, that man is mad."

"Well, sir, so I feared; but I yet wished to have your opinion without having told you anything about him."

"The wound has made him so, Taylor, and when I look at it I can tell just what his chances are."

"He has fever coming on, and the wound may be fatal."

"The bullet did not enter his head, sir, but glanced on the skull, fracturing it."

"Well, I shall soon know, for I gave him something that put him to sleep, and after breakfast we will see to him."

"But who shot him?"

"I did, sir."

"You, Buck?"

"Yes, sir."

"The mystery deepens; but come, I will show you to your room, and while you freshen up I will hear what you have to tell, if you care to have me know."

"Oh, yes, sir, I wish you to know all, and I need your advice, for if that man was conscious of where I took him from I do not wonder that he is mad."

"You interest me, Buck; but here is your room, and you can freshen up with cold water, for I know that I cannot tempt you with a mint julep as you never drink."

"No, thank you, prairie air and water are tonic enough for me, though I do feel a little fagged, and you will not wonder at it when I tell my story."

"I am a good listener, Buck."

With this hint the Saddle King made known to Captain Hassan in confidence all that he had passed through.

"You see, Captain Hassan," he said, after the ranchero had listened attentively to all he had to tell; "I volunteered up at the fort to capture that man Tiger Tom."

"A wagon train was robbed some time ago by a man answering his description, though his followers were Comanches."

"Then the Sante Fe stage was held up by one man and its passengers robbed."

"I went to his ranch and found that he was absent from it at the time of the two robberies, and so I told Colonel Miles that I would see if I could not capture Tiger Tom and prove the robberies upon him."

"A bold undertaking to capture that man from all I have heard of him, Buck, but have you given up being cowboy?"

"No, sir, I am chief of cowboys for the Government herd of cattle, only I concluded to do a little extra work, you see?"

"Yes, and you have done it; but come to breakfast now, and afterward we will talk the matter all over, for your story is indeed a strange one."

CHAPTER XIII.

HE MUST LIVE.

STILL a very lovely woman in form and face was Mrs. Hassan, and speaking English with an accent that was very fascinating, she met the Saddle King in a way that showed how welcome he was at Soldier's Retreat.

Both her little hands she clasped over his honest one and said:

"It is kind of you to come to us sometimes, Senor Taylor, to show that we are not forgotten."

"Don't you think you should make your coming here like angels' visits?" and as the mother spoke her eyes dimmed for she never saw the brave young Texan that her heart was not touched, her memory going back to the rescue of the idol of their home, little Belle, as she was then, by the daring youth who had ventured so much to save her from the Comanches.

And "Little Belle?"

In the years that had passed since she had escaped with Buck Taylor from the mountain village of the Comanches, she had grown into maidenhood, and of a strange weird beauty.

There were her mother's grand eyes, shaded by longest of lashes, that gave them at times a dreamy look, and with strongly-marked brows, forming a perfect arch.

Her complexion was dark, showing the Mexican blood in her veins, but clear and radiant in hue, while her nose was straight, slender and an expressive feature of her lovely face.

The mouth was the same as her father's, almost reckless in expression, with resolution and indomitable will power, which would have been too prominent if not softened by her glorious eyes, and yet they at times were swayed by the look that sometimes rested upon her mouth.

Her ruby lips, arched as they were in some humors, and parted to show her milk-white even teeth, would wear an expression such as an angel might envy, and yet there would come a quick change, and a close observer could see that there was an expression like a "danger signal" sweeping over the mouth, and at such times the eyes came into sympathy with it.

Her form was faultless, willowy, yet built for strength and endurance, and in perfect keeping with her face and nature.

Fearless as an Indian, and riding like one, a deadly shot with rifle, revolver, bow and arrow, and throwing a lasso unerringly, Belle Hassan was the admiration of all the bold spirits who knew her, and yet under her accomplished mother's tuition, she had become a good student, a devoted reader, a fair artist, and a musician of no mean pretensions, her voice being strangely pathetic and soft in its tone.

A woman to trust with one's honor, one's life, was Belle Hassan, true as steel, and yet not one to drive or attempt to crush or deceive.

Such was the lovely girl of sixteen who went up to the Saddle King, and grasping his hand, said in her frank, sweet way:

"I am so glad to see you, Brother Buck, and knowing how welcome you are at Soldier's Retreat, why do you come so seldom?"

Since they had been captives together among the Comanches, Belle had always called Buck brother, while he invariably addressed her as "Girl Pard."

Soldier's Retreat was noted for its beautiful table, and in spite of his fatigue, Buck Taylor enjoyed his breakfast immensely.

But soon after he excused himself to the ladies and accompanied the captain out to the office, where the wounded man lay as motionless as they had left him.

"You fenced well, Buck, against the thrusts of my wife and daughter, as to who was your friend," said the captain with a laugh.

"I had not studied up a story to tell, for it never struck me that they would ask, sir, so I had to reply as best I could."

"You were wise for a prepared story is often forgotten at the last minute, and one's wit had always best be depended upon to help them out of scrapes."

"If one has wit, sir."

"Well, you have."

"I? Oh, no, mine is horse sense only, sir."

"Well, your horse sense as you call it, has saved your life a hundred times."

"Aided by my horse," laughed Buck, but then he said, seriously:

"And now to that poor fellow, captain."

"Do you remember when you shot him?"

"Yes, sir. I think he rode a spotted horse, now I recall his dress, and I aimed at his head, though the range was long."

"Was he not the wounded one you saw the outlaws grouped around?"

"I think not, sir, for being wounded in the head and lying motionless, they supposed him to be dead and threw him across a horse to carry off to where they buried him."

"But why should such men take such pains to bury their dead?"

"Superstition alone, sir, for, being criminals, they are superstitious."

"I believe you are right; but when do you think he was buried?"

"Before dawn, sir, and the men hastened away."

"So he was how long in the grave?"

"About five hours, perhaps not so long."

All this time the captain was getting out the surgical instruments he would need, sending for warm water and preparing for what might have to be done in the way of an operation.

Being ready, he went into the adjoining room, and the two sat down by the patient.

Taking his pulse and temperature, the captain then unbanded the head, cut away the mass of curling hair close to the scalp, so as to expose the wound fully to view, and then began to probe to see just what damage the bullet had done.

The Saddle King watched him with the deepest attention, for somehow he had become strangely interested in this unknown young outlaw.

Taking away pieces of the bone the captain cleansed the wound thoroughly and then said:

"I believe he will live, Buck, yes, he must not die, for in him rests the solving of this mystery of the Branded Hand."

"Ah! you think so will—"

"He will betray his Comanches to you," was the significant response of Captain Hassan, and it set the Saddle King to thinking.

CHAPTER XIV.

AS AN ESCORT.

FOR several days did Buck Taylor remain at Soldier's Retreat on a visit.

He was not only anxious to see what turn would come in the condition of the wounded outlaw, but then he enjoyed greatly the kind hospitality of the host and hostess, was delighted to be with Belle, either for a dash over the prairies, practicing at a target or lasso-throwing, or indoors listening to her sing in her sweet, pathetic way.

But the words of Captain Hassan had set the Saddle King to thinking.

All he had done for the wounded prisoner, had been from the goodness of his heart.

He had not thought of the future, or what use the man might be to him.

Naturally, rescued from such a fate as would have been his, but for the Saddle King, the young man would regard the claim of his preserver upon him above all other claims.

He would be willing, Buck thought, to tell all he knew about the band of which the brand in his hand, as the Texan called it, showed that he was a member of.

Tiger Tom had been considered a ranchero upon a small scale, wild and reckless to desperation when on a spree, yet not one who had been guilty of any lawless acts beyond his shooting scrapes under the influence of drink.

Of his antecedents nothing was known, other than his boast that there was a price on his head when he got maddened by liquor.

Those who had taken him at his word, with one exception, had regretted it, and the reader knows that Buck Taylor was the exception.

He had suspected the man of being a fugitive from justice, and knowing that a man answering his description had killed and robbed a paymaster and deserted from the army, a man by the name of Tom Trescott, he had jumped at the conclusion that he had his man when he saw the "T. T., Fifth Cavalry, U. S. A.," in india ink on the right wrist as he held his revolver above his head defying the crowd.

Having started upon this trail, Buck Taylor meant to stick to it.

Whether Tiger Tom had the star and tiger brand on his hand or not he had not observed.

That he had been most cleverly rescued from him he did know, and he was sure that there must be an organized band, of which Tiger Tom was chief, to have so well planned and executed the rescue.

The band, if such existed, was for a purpose certainly lawless, and to run them to earth the Saddle King made up his mind should be his work.

Holding the position of chief of cowboys of the herds of Government cattle, he had a daring, able lot of men to call to his aid if need be, and after a long talk with Captain Hassan he said:

"Now my duty is plain, sir, for I shall go to the fort, get an indefinite leave from Colonel Miles, and post my cowboys as to what I wish them to do."

"They will be better than soldiers, Buck, in an affair of this kind," said Captain Hassan.

"Yes, so I think, sir, and I shall use them to the best advantage; but now I shall go to the fort, then return by Tiger Tom's ranch and see if I can catch him there—"

"Be careful, for if he has a band, as you suspect, some of them he evidently keeps within call."

"Yes, sir, doubtless; but I shall go prepared against any treachery."

"If he is not there I shall return to Trail Crossing and see if he has returned to that place."

"And there, too, you must be careful, for if he had so many rescuers at short notice, they will be there, too."

"Yes, sir, but I have a friend there in Monte Joe, the gambler, of whom I spoke, and there is a better element at Trail Crossing that held the lawless ones in check, or I would never have been able to have gotten away with my prisoner."

"Well, Buck, I have confidence in you, and you know just what you are about."

"If you need any aid that I or my men can give you, do not hesitate to ask for it."

"I thank you, sir; but now, please, tell me just what you think of this wounded man?"

"Well, he has fever, though no inflammation has set in."

"When I break his fever I will know if his reason has come back to him, or been destroyed by the shock."

"If his reason is gone, Captain Hassan?"

"Well, I believe that I can, by a surgical operation, restore him to reason."

"I sincerely hope so."

"The wound is not a fatal one, unless inflammation follows."

"He is young, in good health, and has a strong constitution, and may pull through to perfect restoration, while again, though physically restored, mentally he may be a wreck."

"So I at present diagnose his case; but he shall have every attention, and old Lulu seems devoted to him in a wonderful degree, from some strange reason I cannot understand; but she acts as though she knew him."

"This is strange, and it would be well, sir, to keep a watch on her and find out."

"Yes, I shall do so."

"Especially when he is recovering, for he might pretend to be worse than he really was, and some night give us the slip."

"I'll see that he does not do that; but you consider him a prisoner, then?"

"Well, sir, I hardly know how to consider him."

"To all intents and purposes he suffered death for his crime, and was buried."

"Now I dug him out of the grave, and though I believe I would set him free if he asked it, still I hope to discover from him, as you suggested, some clew to the lawless band of which he surely is a member."

"Well, Buck, I'll see that he recovers, if recovery is possible, and that he does not escape from us, so rest easy on that matter."

"I will, sir, and now I must say good-by, and when half an hour after the Saddle King departed from Soldier's Retreat, Belle, mounted upon a superb black horse, went as his escort for a few miles on his way over the prairie."

CHAPTER XV.

ROPED IN.

"WELL, Girl Pard, I reckon you had better not go any further than this," said Buck Taylor, drawing rein some six miles away from Soldier's Retreat, at the bottom of a hill he had to cross on his way to the fort.

"Ah! so you do not wish my company then?" Belle said with an air of reproach.

"Through life," was the gallant reply of the cowboy chief, and his face flushed as he uttered the words.

"I think you will have to go alone," Belle demurely rejoined, allowing him to put what construction he pleased upon the words.

"At least a part of the way; but joking aside, Girl Pard, you are further away from home now than I like to have you in these perilous times."

"What perilous times?"

"Well, you know Comanches and Mexicans will prowl around."

"See here, Brother Buck, you are keeping a secret from me, for I know it."

"There is that wounded stranger you brought in on your horse, while you walked, and whom you would not allow mother or myself to know anything about."

"I thought I told you that I found him wounded as he is."

"You made a very lame explanation, or at least it seemed so to me; but I believe there is trouble brewing and you know just what it is."

"There are some lawless fellows drifting about, Girl Pard, whom I would like to get hold of, that is all."

"Well, I am not afraid of any one, or a dozen men, mounted upon Black Wing as I am, for he is the fleetest animal I ever saw, sure footed as a deer, and as gentle as a kitten in my hands, but vicious as a wolf with others."

"I don't wonder, for you could tame the devil, Girl Pard—pardon me."

"I have never tamed you yet."

"Thank you; but I was born wild; but you must get home before nightfall, so I will say good-by."

"No, I'll ride to the top of the range, and see the view from there, for it is grand, with the prairie lighted up with the setting sun and the valley on the other side in deepest shadow."

"It reminds me of our lives, Brother Buck, sunshine and shadows, and from some lives the shadows never lift," and Belle seemed to be speaking to herself as though thinking aloud, rather than to her companion.

So on to the top of the ridge she went, and the beauty of the view was indeed well worth the further ride.

"Now go on, Brother Buck, and leave me here to think awhile, for when the shadows begin to deepen I will start for home and go with Black Wing at full speed."

"Good-by, and come again soon, if only to look after the mysterious wounded stranger."

She held out her gauntlet gloved hand, and as he clasped it he raised his sombrero and turned away with a simple word of farewell upon his lips.

Somehow the "King" among men seemed like a slave in the presence of this Girl Pard of his.

But then is it to be wondered at, for what power is there in a woman's hand, her lips, her look; what magnetism in her touch, and it is well that many of them do not know the power they possess over the *genus homo*, or there would be more sin, sorrow and suffering in this world than there now is by far.

Down the sloping trail into the shadows of the valley rode the Saddle King.

Ever and anon he would turn in his saddle and glance back at the ridge, to see Belle still there, her horse and herself looking like a statue of black marble relieved against the sky, for she wore a black velvet riding habit, embroidered with gold thread and buttons, and a sombrero looped up upon one side, encircled by a golden cord and shadowed with a heavy sable plume.

He waved his hand as he was disappearing deeper into the shadows of the valley; but no response came, for she seemed to be regarding with rapt attention the beauty of the scene before her, upon her left all shadow in the valley, and upon her right all sunshine on the hillside and prairie, while far away in the distance the white walls of Soldier's Retreat were visible, with the stream winding half around it like a sheltering arm.

And so the Saddle King passed out of sight in the deepening gloom of the valley, while bathed in sunlight Belle Hassan still sat upon her horse, beast and rider as motionless as statues.

"Oh! how beautiful!" suddenly exclaimed the young girl.

"I could remain here and watch the night come on with so much pleasure; but the trail down the hill is a narrow and steep one, and is very dangerous in the darkness, while I promised papa I would not remain out after nightfall."

"So, Black Wing, you have got to show your best pace to have me keep my word."

"Yer don't git home this night, my beaut?"

Though taken completely by surprise, caught off her guard, other than a light start at the voice breaking upon her ears, Belle Hassan showed no emotion.

She had turned her horse to descend the trail, and there, behind a large rock, his rifle leaning across the top and aimed at her horse, was a man.

"Don't travel, or I'll drop your horse, for you is wuth considerable ter me!"

Belle realized the situation fully, and her danger.

But her presence of mind did not desert her, and she said:

"Am I? Well, I suppose I must submit."

"I calkerlates yer hed better, my beauty, for I wants dust, and yer pa has got ter pay big money ter get yer back."

"Suppose he refuses?"

"Waal, then I'll sell yer ter ther Comanches," was the startling response, and in spite of her nerve Belle felt the color leave her face.

"Come, I wants that belt o' arms yer wears, fer claws is dangerous when a woman has 'em, and I has heard yer is lightnin' on ther shoot an' death on ther aim."

"I would like to show you a sample of my aim," was the cool response.

"See here! I'd kill yer, gal though yer be, as quick as I w'd a snake, ef yer attempts ter lay yer hand on a weepin."

"I is a man without a conscience, so don't go ter bluff me."

"I has roped yer in, and I intends ter sell yer ter ther highest bidder," and the man leaped over the rock to the side of the horse, grasping the rein as he did so, and covering Belle with his revolver, which his evil look showed he would use even on her.

CHAPTER XVI.

CAUGHT IN THE COIL.

BELLE HASSAN'S indomitable will came well to her aid, in the trying ordeal through which she had to pass, as the prisoner of the ruffian who had come upon her.

Buck Taylor was far beyond hearing of her call, for he must have gone over a mile, even with his horse in a walk, in the time she had sat upon her horse enraptured with the view before her.

A pistol-shot might reach his ears, and she thought of it; but then if she dared put her hand upon the revolver in her belt to fire an alarm, she could just as readily aim at the man before her.

There was something in the face of the man that told her that her life was no more to him than that of his foe.

So her pluck did not desert her, and with a manner that seemed indifferent she was the while on the alert constantly for some chance to act.

The man unbuckled the belt about her slender waist, and removed thus her "claws," as he called the two pretty revolvers she carried.

"Now, sis, yer goes with me," he said.

"Where?"

"Waal, I hain't a-followin' on ther trail o' Buck Taylor, yer may sw'ar ter."

"He are too notionate ter suit me, and like as not he'd ride back up here ter see ef yer got safe home, which yer hain't a-goin' ter do."

"So I goes down to ther trail at ther base o' ther ridge, and follers it over toward ther Rio Grande, for then I know I is safe."

"Oh, I don't care, go anwwhere you wish."

"Yer' cool about it."

"Why should I fret over what cannot be helped?"

"Now yer is game, sis, and I has got ter look for yer, for wimmens bears watchin' same as Injuns."

"And how about men?"

"Waal, yer jist keep yer eyes on me."

"Now ter biz, or thet cowboy may come back this way, and I'd rather fight a Comanche vilage than tackle thet pilgrim."

"You are afraid of him then?"

"I be fer a fact, for he hain't like ther ordinary run o' men, for he can't be kilt; but now we goes."

He led her horse along as he spoke behind the rock, and there Belle saw an animal saddled and bridled awaiting his rider.

Taking his lariat from his saddle-bow he tied one end of it about the neck of Black Wing.

The other end he made secure about his saddle-bow, and mounting rode down the steep trail, thus leading Belle's horse.

A smile came over the face of the brave girl as she saw him ride thus ahead of her, and she muttered to herself:

"Yes, wimmens bears watchin' same as Injuns," repeating his own words.

By holding up her hand to her horse, he lagged back until the lead rope was taut, and the man said:

"I'll hev ter make thet beast o' yourn come alongside when we reaches ther prairie trail, for he hangs back hard."

"Yes, he does not appear to lead well," was the answer, and as she spoke Belle dropped her hand gently upon her own lasso.

She carefully arranged the noose and coil to suit herself, and then urged her horse to slacken up upon the lead rope.

Then, with a sudden whirl she cast her lariat with unerring skill, her well trained horse threw himself back upon his haunches, and the animal of the kidnapper seeing her act sprung forward to avoid the noose.

The lariat came taut with a twang, the noose about the arms and body of the man, who was jerked quickly from his saddle and fell heavily to the ground with a shock that bruised and hurt him.

Hardly had the lasso left her hand when she slipped from her saddle and with a bound was by the side of the prostrate man, who was powerless in the lariat's coil and from the shock of his fall.

Seizing one of his own revolvers from his belt, she said in imitation of his tone and words: "Wimmens bears watchin' same as Injuns, and yer jist keep yer eye on me."

"Now, sir, you are my prisoner," and her voice now was stern and determined, while she slipped his weapons from his belt, and calling to her horse to approach, wound the slack of the lariat around and around the prisoner, thus pinioning his arms to his side.

"Oh Lordy! my arm is broke, and yer hurt it," groaned the man.

"Your neck will hurt I fear when I give you over to the cowboys on the ranch," was the reply.

"Lor' gal, I was jist a-jokin', fer I meant yer no harm."

"Well, I cannot see the joke, so you will have to explain it to my father."

"He'll hang me."

"I would not be surprised if he did."

The man groaned again, and having made the lariat fast, Belle went to where his horse had stopped, got her own belt of arms, hung his on the horn of her saddle and led the animal back to a rock.

"Now mount!"

"I won't do it."

"See here, if you would kill me, a young girl, how much more cause have I to kill you, a disgrace to the name of man."

"Mount, or I will tie you here to a tree and leave you for the wolves."

The man was terrified at this threat and stepped upon the rock and got into his saddle.

Taking a piece of his lasso she tied his feet together under his horse, while he moaned:

"I am hurted, gal, badly hurted, for my arm is broke and some o' my ribs, too."

"I do not believe you; but my father is a surgeon and can set your bones for you."

"He can't set my neck ef them cowboys git hold of me."

"No, I don't think he can do that," and as Belle spoke she made the lariat fast about the neck of the kidnapper's horse, and also around Black Wing.

Then she sprung into her saddle, for it was twilight now, the sun having disappeared beyond the prairie horizon.

"Now, we will ride for Soldier's Retreat."

"Say, little gal, show some mercy for me and let me go."

"No, there is no mercy in my heart for you," was the stern response, and the horses started at a rapid gallop across the prairie for Soldier's Retreat.

CHAPTER XVII.

HER PRISONER.

HAMPERED with her prisoner, whose horse was by no means a match for Black Wing in speed, Belle Hassan could not ride as rapidly as she wished.

But she kept the horse of the outlaw up to a sweeping gallop, for night settled down before she had gotten one-third the way back to Soldier's Retreat.

There, however, were the lights gleaming from the windows of the house, like beacons to guide one to shelter and food, for Captain Hassan loved a cheerful home and in the little cupola upon the top of his cabin a lamp was kept burning all night, and could be seen for miles in all directions.

Then, as soon as it was dark, the house was lighted up as though there was an entertainment going on.

This lighting of his home had given it a name by which it was well known far and wide, that of "Beacon Ranch," though the captain stuck to his name of Soldier's Retreat.

On the ride the kidnapper tried to be entertaining, but he received no encouragement from Belle.

She was not, however, indifferent to his sufferings, for his fall had bruised him up considerably, and she intended that he should have every attention once she reached home with him.

And more, she knew that if she did not protect him, once the cowboys of the ranch got their clutches upon him, they would hang him.

This she would not allow under any circumstances.

That he had threatened to kill her rather than she should escape, she knew he meant, as also that if her father did not pay the exorbitant ransom he would demand, he would be revengeful enough to give her up to the Comanches.

These thoughts made her bitter and stern, when, had he not made them, once she had mastered him, she would have been tempted to let him go his way.

But now she would take him to the ranch, and her father should decide what was best to be done with him, so long as he did not turn him over to the cowboys to try his case as judge, jury and executioners.

"Leetle gal, ef yer lets me go I'll never fergit yer," urged the prisoner, pleadingly, as the lights grew nearer and nearer.

"And if I do not, you'll never forget me."

"Say, yer don't want my life in yer putty head, does yer?"

"No, I do not, but you should have thought of the punishment before you committed the crime."

The man was silent, and soon after Belle dashed into the yard with her prisoner, just as a party of cowboys, summoned to the house, were about to start in search of her, for Captain Hassan was anxious from what Buck Taylor had told him, where ordinarily he had regarded the country as safe enough, considering the exposed position of his ranch.

"Ah, Buck, you have come back again," cried

the captain, seeing in the darkness a man riding by Belle's side.

"It is not Brother Buck, father."

"Ah! a stranger?"

"He is welcome," was the hospitable reply.

"I'm durned glad ter know it, cap'n," said the prisoner, just as a chorus came from the cowboys.

"Why, Miss Belle, you've got him a prisoner!"

"A prisoner?"

"Yes, father."

"And sent back by the Saddle King for safe keeping?"

"No, papa, the Saddle King had nothing to do with the capture of this man, or sending him back."

"Brother Buck had left me on the ridge, watching the scenery, and when I turned to go this—this gentleman, had the drop on me from behind a rock."

"Hang him!" shouted the cowboys.

But Belle said, quickly:

"Please hear my story."

"That means I'm hanged," said the prisoner, with an uneasy look toward the cowboys.

Belle had not dismounted, but still sat in her saddle, the prisoner on his horse by her side.

She had ridden more into the light of the lamp on the piazza, and all could see distinctly the evil, hang-dog face of her prisoner.

"Tell us your story, my child," said the captain, with some nervousness, while Mrs. Hassan stood silent and pale listening to all, and her eyes upon the face of her beautiful daughter.

"As he had me covered, papa, I could only submit, so he took off my belt of arms, put his lariat around Black Wing's neck, and mounting his own horse, set off down the trail to the prairie."

"A kidnapper, eh?"

"It were only a joke ter skeer her, cap'n."

"Hang him!" roared the cowboys.

"Oh, Lord! I'll be lifted sartin'," came with a moan from the now thoroughly frightened man.

"And then, Belle?"

"As I had my lariat, I did not feel hopeless, papa, so just caught him with it, Black Wing dropped back while his horse bounded forward, and I yanked him out of the saddle."

"He fell heavily, and says that his arm, collar-bone, and half a dozen ribs are broken, but I guess it is not as bad as—"

Belle was checked by a perfect yell of delight from the cowboys, now increased to a dozen in number, as they heard what she had done.

One of the cowboys, by means of a feeler, just gave his lariat a whirl over the prisoner's head.

But Belle quickly threw it off with the remark:

"This is my prisoner, not yours, Cowboy Barry."

"But you is going ter give him ter us fer a Christmas gift, Miss Belle?" urged Barry.

"No, my father is to decide what is to be done with him."

"I lassoed him, and brought him in, so, father, I turn him over to you."

"And I give him into your hands, men," was the stern reply of Captain Hassan, as Belle slipped from her saddle and ran up the steps to greet her mother.

CHAPTER XVIII.

TO SAVE A LIFE.

THE cowboys of Soldier's Retreat fairly idolized Belle, the "Girl Captain," and "Captain Belle" as they were wont to call her.

A number of them had been with Captain Hassan when he had rescued her mother, Marion Inglis, and afterward had gone with him to his ranch, so they had known the maiden from her babyhood.

When therefore she brought in her prisoner, a man who had covered her with a rifle, disarmed her and made her a captive, they were wild with rage, though they suppressed their feelings as much as they could.

The moment that she had said she left the prisoner to her father's keeping, she had slipped from her horse and ran up to greet her mother, who at once drew her into the house, her arms about her.

And then came for the prisoner the fateful words of Captain Hassan, incensed beyond endurance at the scoundrel for his act.

"And I give him into your hands, men."

That was enough for the cowboys, and half a dozen lariats dropped over the bound form of the prisoner, his horse was wheeled to the right-about and they dashed away like the wind for their camps, a mile distant.

The prisoner knew what that meant.

He was in the hands of men who would kill him for his act as they would a snake that barred their way.

So from his lips broke one long, loud agonizing shriek of despair, followed by the words:

"Help, leetle gal, help! Save me! for the love of God, save me!"

Captain Hassan heard that wild cry and closed his ears to the despairing appeal, as the cowboys dashed away with their victim.

But it reached the ears of Belle Hassan too, and she cried quickly:

"My God, mother! they must not hang that man, or he will haunt me through my life!"

With a bound she had reached the door and loud rung her voice:

"Hold! come back!"

"You shall not hang him!"

But they were two hundred yards away now and the trampling of the flying hoofs drowned her voice.

"Quick, father! call to them, for he shall not die!" she said, almost fiercely.

Then Captain Hassan relented, and in stentorian tones he called after the men.

But they heard him not, or if hearing did not heed.

Drawing a revolver from her belt Belle hastily fired it several times to attract attention.

But it had no effect if they heard it.

The peon stableman had led her horse away; but gathering up her riding habit she fairly leaped down the steps and ran after the man.

"Belle! Belle! what would you do?" cried her father.

But she did not heed now, and flying around the house she soon came to the stables just as the peon was unsaddling her horse.

"Stop, Tonto! I wish my horse."

"Strap the saddle tighter!" she ordered peremptorily.

The man hastily obeyed and with a hand on the horn she leaped into the saddle and was off like an arrow from a bow.

Her father called to her, but back came her answer:

"They shall not hang him!"

The cowboys had now gotten a start of an eighth of a mile, and were going at the full speed of their horses.

At their camps were trees where they could swing up the man they had unanimously doomed to death, and they would lose no time in the execution of their will. Some had heard the call of Belle, others the cry of Captain Hassan, and all knew that the revolver-shots were to call them back.

But they were not going to be cheated out of their prey.

They would express regrets and swear they had heard nothing.

But they had not counted upon the determined will of the young girl.

She was not one to be turned aside from her own sweet way, and she was hot upon their heels.

For the first time in his knowledge Black Wing felt the sting of the whip which Belle always carried swung to her saddle-horn.

He was running well, and gave a snort of indignation at this treatment, shaking his head in anger.

"The dumb brute must suffer for the human being, Black Wing—it is Nature's law," said Belle, and again and again the keen lash descended until the now frightened horse fairly flew over the prairie.

"You are picking them up rapidly, Black Wing," cried Belle, enjoying the hot chase by night over the prairie.

At last she heard the plunge of the horses into the creek, on which the camp of the cowboys was located, and then loud rung the order:

"Now, men, bring him up to Deadman's Tree!" referring to a lightning-riven tree on which several horse-thieves already had been hanged.

The panting horse of the outlaw was placed beneath the tree and a lariat soon was adjusted about the neck of the victim.

Then the other end of the lasso was thrown over a big lower limb, and half a dozen cowboys, still mounted, were about to haul on the other end, when, with a bound, Black Wing reached the spot, was thrown back upon his haunches by his fair rider, while, as she leveled a revolver at the group of cowboys, she cried:

"That man shall not hang!"

"The man who draws on that lasso dies!"

CHAPTER XIX.

PUT TO THE TEST.

THE cowboys were foiled.

They had been headed off, and by a young girl.

Their intention was to punish the wretch who had attempted to harm her, and her good heart had thwarted them in their design.

So they were quick to make the best of it, and Barry said in an injured tone:

"Lor', Captain Belle, ef we'd 'a' thought you didn't want him hanged, we w'u'd never have done it."

"Barry, there is a Bible story about Ananias and Sapphira you should read," was Belle's rejoinder, but she could not help smiling at the cowboy's ready lie, and her words checked the protestations that were on the lips of all, to the effect that Barry had spoken the gospel truth.

"You heard the recall, boys, but you were bent on hanging the poor devil, and I was just in time to prevent it, for you were not giving him a second for a prayer."

"A whole life o' prayin' w'u'dn't help him none, Cap'n Belle," said one of the men.

"Well, I captured him, and I won't have his life on my hands."

"I shall take him back with me to the ranch, so give me the end of the lariat, Barry."

Barry obeyed, and with her own hands Belle loosened the noose about the prisoner's neck and tossed it upon the ground.

"Good-night, boys, I'll forgive you as you meant well toward me," and kissing her fingertips to the now subdued band of cowboys, Belle turned to ride away with her prisoner, when half of them spurred forward as one said:

"We'll see you safe home, Cap'n Belle."

"No need of it, thank you, for there comes papa," and the light of a large camp-fire burning in front of one of the cabins revealed Captain Hassan as he rode up mounted upon a bare-backed horse, for he had not stopped to put the saddle on.

"I saved him, papa."

"I hope you will not live to regret it, my child," was the response, and with a word to the cowboys Captain Hassan wheeled his horse alongside of his daughter and they started back for the ranch, the prisoner following, and trembling at the loud cheer given "For Cap'n Belle, a Dandy in Petticoats!"

"You are a brave little woman, Belle, and this man should hide his head in shame that he ever meant harm toward you," said Captain Hassan as they rode home together.

"I does, I does! I is almost dead with shame, cap'n," came from the shivering wretch.

"With fright, rather; but who are you?"

"I is a man in hard luck, cap'n, havin' been unfortinit in the New Mexico mines."

"I confesses I thought as how I might raise a leetle ransom money off ther young gal, but I didn't take inter consideration she war wuss nor a catamount ter handle."

"You are a stranger here?"

"Yas, cap'n, a perfect stranger, no friends, no food, no nothin'."

"Then how was it that you knew Buck Taylor, and more, that my father was rich enough to pay a large ransom for me?" quickly asked Belle.

The man was silent, and Captain Hassan said:

"Well, you have made a mistake coming into this part of the country, and I shall hold you a prisoner for a few days until I decide what is best to be done with you."

"Jist let me go, cap'n, and I'll never come this way ag'in."

"I will take time to think it over," was the reply; but had Belle told her father and the cowboys the threats the man had made, I doubt if she could have saved him from their fury, for if they could not have hanged him they would have shot him.

This the man knew, and he was in terrible fear that she might yet tell all.

Arriving at the ranch, Captain Hassan gave the prisoner into the charge of two of the trusted peons, with orders to give him some supper and place him in a cabin used as a lockup, where one of them was to remain as a guard over him until the morning.

Then he went in and joined his wife and daughter at supper, and the manner in which he spoke to the mother of their brave girl made Belle's cheeks tingle with pride and pleasure.

"I was riding for a life, mamma, for I could not let them hang one whom I had captured, as I would feel guilty myself," said Belle.

That night she retired to her bed confident of having accomplished a good deed, and it is a pleasant thought to carry to one's couch with one, kind reader, as you may know.

The next morning Captain Hassan went out to see the prisoner, before Belle and her mother appeared.

He found him secure under the guard of Tonto the peon, and looking haggard and anxious.

"What is your name, sir?"

"Tanglefoot, the boys calls me."

"I suppose you are ashamed of your other."

"I doesn't use it, cap'n, nowadays."

"For good reasons?"

"Maybe."

"You are not looking well; let me feel your pulse."

The man extended his right hand, but Captain Hassan took the left, giving a quick glance at the palm as he placed his fingers upon the pulse.

"Your pulse is quick and feverish."

"Come with me to my office, and I will give you a dose of medicine."

"It hain't p'izen, be it, cap'n?"

"I am not one to poison a man who ought to be hanged, and will be some day," was the stern rejoinder.

Slipping a pair of manacles upon his wrists, the captain bade the prisoner follow him and led the way to his office, Tonto also going.

He entered the office door and led the way directly into the next room where the wounded stranger lay, Lulu near him.

"There is a friend of yours!" he said sharply, pointing to the cot where the wounded man lay, and riveting his gaze upon the face of the prisoner at the same instant.

One glance at the pale face on the cot and the prisoner uttered a cry of horror, started back—

ward toward the door, and dropping into a chair while beads of sweat rolled from his forehead, cried:

"My God! it is Lady Jim! or his ghost."

"And who is Lady Jim?" asked the captain, his eyes fixed searchingly upon the man's face, watching every movement and expression.

"A pard o' mine, cap'n, whom the Comanches kilt, and whom we buried decent only a few nights ago."

"Oh Lord! it can't be Lady Jim! no, folks don't prowl arter they is dead, does they cap'n?"

The face of Captain Hassan wore a smile, a strange one, but he made no immediate reply to the question of his prisoner.

CHAPTER XX.

THE LONE CABIN.

WHOLLY unconscious of the danger of the fair girl whom he had left upon the ridge, Buck Taylor wended his way into the valley, to take the trail which would lead him on to Fort D—.

He rode like one ever on the alert for danger, from an instinct and long habit of watchfulness, rather than as though he was looking for any particular peril to bar his way.

Not a leaf rustled by the wind, the spring of a rabbit in the brush, or a squirrel in the trees but caught his keen eyes, and his horse seemed to have the same watchfulness about him, for his ears were constantly pricked for some discovery.

Had the Saddle King suspected that the danger lay back upon his trail, how rapidly he would have flown back to the rescue.

But this he could not know, and when he had waved a farewell upon entering the timber, a wave of the hand that Belle did not see, he quickened his pace and went along at a fox-trot which would rapidly throw the hills behind him and yet not distress his horse.

He knew of a camping-place off the trail a short distance, some miles ahead, and so he held on his way until he reached it.

A fire was soon burning in a canyon, sheltered from view, his horse had been watered and was feeding upon the tender grass, and the cowboy chief soon broiled a tender steak brought with him from Soldier's Retreat, and ate his supper with the relish of a good appetite and perfect digestion.

Then he wrapped himself in his blankets and went to sleep like a man with a consciousness of having wronged no man intentionally.

Bright and early he was on his way again, and coming to a crossing of the trails he halted like one in a quandary.

At last, he mused aloud:

"He would hardly return so soon to Trail Crossing, and so must have gone to his ranch."

"Yes, I will go by and make a call, for he only has a couple of cowboys with him, I have heard."

So the Saddle King branched off on the trail that led him toward the Rio Grande.

It was late in the evening when he dismounted upon a hill, and creeping up to the top looked over.

There, a mile away, rose a hill like a sugar-loaf, yet connected with the range upon which Buck Taylor stood with a low but rugged ridge that could not be crossed by a horseman.

"Ah! now I discover a secret of that ridge I did not know before," he said, as he turned his glass upon it.

"Although one cannot cross it, between those hills and yonder sentinel-like mound, from there here is a trail along it that can be followed."

"This gives Tiger Tom a good chance of escape in the rear if crowded in front."

"Well, he has a snug cabin there, strong as a fort, and mighty few cattle."

"I guess I'll take the ridge trail to the cabin, if I can find the end of it while daylight lasts."

He at once set about his search, and where many would have failed who were less skillful prairie men he was successful, just as night came on.

"Well, Friend, we will see if yonder cabin is hospitable enough to give shelter to man and beast," he said as he returned to his horse.

Bidding him follow him the cowboy chief led the way on foot, and entered upon the ridge trail leading to the sugar-loaf-like hill a mile distant.

It was night now, and as he went along he heard the loud baying of a dog.

"Ah! that won't do."

"I must not let him know that I have found he has a way of retreat."

"Come, Friend, we will go back and approach the cabin by the regular trail."

With the patience of an Indian and taking everything that barred his way as a matter of course, he retraced his steps to the hill and flanking it wound off toward the solitary cabin of Tiger Tom, far from the nearest settlement and so utterly alone.

He approached the hill from the regular trail and again heard the loud barking of a dog.

As he drew nearer another dog joined in.

"Big dogs from their bark," muttered Buck Taylor.

"Ah! a third chips in the chorus."

"Well, Tiger Tom is determined to know

when he has visitors coming, be they friends or foes.

"It is too dark for him to recognize me, if he is here, so I'll ride up and be ready for him."

"Some one is at home, for there is a light in the cabin."

"I'll bet ten to one it was not put there to welcome me," and he laughed at his own conceit.

He watched the cabin closely as he approached and beheld a flash of light, which showed that a door had been quickly opened and closed.

"Ah! somebody came out then and has position on me; but I must go on now."

To show that he was not making a quiet approach upon the cabin he called out to the dogs:

"Oh, stop your barking, dogs, for you have roused everybody if they are not deaf or dead."

It was a disappointment to the Saddle King to find the place guarded by dogs, for had it not been he could have reconnoitered most thoroughly on foot.

As he drew nearer, although he was well aware that some one was lurking in the shadows, doubtless covering him with a rifle, he called out:

"Ho, there! can a wayfarer get shelter and food?"

"Who are you?" asked a voice nearer to him than he had supposed him to be.

"A scout, pard, and used up by a hard ride."

"I saw your light and came here."

"Are you alone?"

"My horse and myself are all."

"Where are you from?"

"The lower settlements, and bound northward to the fort."

"All right, I guess you can get shelter here."

"Thank you, pard; but whose ranch is this?"

"Thomas Tracey."

"Well, you are a bold man to settle this far from help in time of need."

"I am not Tom Tracey, but his herder."

"Ah! and is the boss at home?"

"No, but we are expecting him soon."

"All right, pard; now show me where I can put my horse, for he's the first to care for."

The man led the way to the rear of the cabin, where there was a shelter of logs, and some haystacks near.

"You'll find hay in plenty, and can put him in there, for our horses are down in the corral."

Having seen to the comfort of his horse, Buck Taylor followed the man into the cabin, and what he beheld there took him completely by surprise.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE TIGER'S LAIR.

As Buck Taylor approached the cabin he saw that it was of logs, with an open space between, and two rooms on either side, while in the rear was a small hut, evidently used as kitchen and eating-room.

The cabin was stoutly built, and looked as though it might stand a siege of an enemy for days.

It was upon the top of the hill, with steep, rugged ground on either side, but sloping off gently toward the rear, and in front was a broad trail coming straight up to a stockade wall that surrounded the acre of land that comprised the summit.

The light he had seen came from the kitchen in the rear, and he had not observed any sign of the large cabin being occupied until his guide threw open a door and said:

"Walk in, stranger, and feel at home."

Then it was that Buck Taylor met with a surprise, for there before him was a large room, with a rag carpet upon the floor and considerable furniture.

There were in the room three persons, a young woman, a negress and a man.

It was the first named that riveted the gaze of the cowboy chief, for she was scarcely over twenty, and very beautiful in face, while her form, clad in a cloth, close-fitting suit was perfected molded.

In her hands she held a Spanish guitar, as though she had just been playing upon it when interrupted by the coming of the visitor.

As Buck Taylor beheld her he doffed his sombrero quickly and bowed, while he said in a courteous way:

"I did not expect to intrude upon a lady's presence, when I came here, and I hope you will pardon me."

The woman gave a slight start, but rose quickly and said:

"You are welcome, sir, and in the absence of my husband you will have to submit to a hostess, for I am Mrs. Tracey."

Buck was almost overwhelmed by what she said.

This beautiful creature the wife of Tiger Tom, the wild ranchero, as he was called?

He could hardly believe he had heard aright, yet he dared not exhibit surprise, it not being supposed that he knew Tiger Tom.

"I thank you, miss—I beg pardon, madam," he said.

"You have not allowed me the pleasure of knowing your name, sir?"

"My name is Taylor, madam, and I am chief of the cowboys at Fort D—."

"Well, Mr. Taylor, you are welcome, and

Aunt Venus had just called us to supper when the dog announced your arrival," and "Aunt Venus" was the old negress before referred to.

Then in the same easy, refined way, she continued:

"You will find *confreres* here in these two gentlemen who care for my husband's herds, cowboys, Doc Barney and Si Dunn."

The two cowboys greeted the stranger with a nod at this introduction, and Mrs. Tracey led Buck out to supper, whither Aunt Venus had gone to set another plate, she said.

The two cowboys followed, and the Saddle King distinctly overheard one whisper to the other:

"It's Buck Taylor."

The visitor made himself very agreeable at the supper, and asked Mrs. Tracey if she was not afraid to live so far away from all help.

"Oh, no, our house is a stout one, and the Indians would get only lead instead of gold if they came, for we are not rich, Mr. Taylor."

"And do the Mexicans never make a dash upon you here?"

"No, we are not troubled by them."

"The truth is, my husband has a reputation that keeps Mexican raiders and Comanches away."

"You may have heard of him, Mr. Taylor."

"Mr. Thomas Tracey I believe is his name?"

"Well, he is better known as Tiger Tom, or the Tiger of Texas."

"Ah, yes, I have heard of him," innocently said the Saddle King.

"Yes, he has a reputation that is pretty well known in this part of Texas as a very deadly foe, and desperate character, and yet I have always found poor Tom as gentle as a woman in his nature."

"I wish you could have seen him at Trail Crossing," thought Buck, but he simply bowed and concluded it was a case of "Beauty and the Beast."

After supper, and the Saddle King greatly enjoyed Aunt Venus's good cooking, they adjourned to the sitting-room again, and off which was the sleeping-room of the strange woman, as Buck regarded her, for, certainly, it was a mystery to see this beautiful creature dwelling there; and, more still, the wife of a man who was a very demon in his nature, as he knew him to be, and an outlaw and desperado.

"Will you sing something for me please?" asked the Saddle King, glancing around the room and noticing that there were a number of books upon some rustic shelves, sketches and paintings in oil and water colors upon the walls.

There was a refinement resting upon all in the room, the home-made curtains over the windows, and in various little things scattered about.

"I will sing with pleasure for you, Mr. Taylor, for I often do so to amuse the boys here and Aunt Venus," and the "boys" were the two cowboys with dark, unhandsome faces, that Buck was not at all drawn to, for he had already diagramed them as follows:

"If Si Dunn and Doc Barney are not rascals their faces give their natures the lie."

Running her fingers lightly over the strings of the guitar she asked:

"What style of music do you like, Mr. Taylor?"

"I like any music that is good," he answered.

And then there came a burst of melody from her lips, and the Saddle King wondered the more that a woman such as the one before him should dwell in the lair of a human tiger, be allied to such a man as was the one who had been his prisoner, and speak of him as though she loved him.

A number of songs she sung, and when at last Buck Taylor went across the open hall to the room Si Dunn led him to, he found himself asking the question over and over again:

"Can that woman be wicked?"

"Can her angel's face hide a devil's heart?"

CHAPTER XXII.

A STRANGE APPEARANCE.

BUCK TAYLOR was given a room to himself, and it had the same air of comfort which was to be found in the rest of this frontier house, showing the hand of a refined woman and good housekeeper.

He supposed that the room next to him was that of the cowboys, and though he felt no fear of an attack, or underhand work, with that beautiful woman in the room, he looked well to the chances of defense and escape.

He knew well his danger, for after all Tiger Tom might be about the cabin, perhaps in it, and if so a plot against his life was sure to follow.

If the desperado had not returned home, or sent word of the affair at Trail Crossing, then he had nothing to dread.

But he had been let into a secret which he had not suspected, the presence of that beautiful woman in the house of the desperate ranchero.

So Buck Taylor lay down upon the cot with his hand conveniently near his revolver.

Hardly had he left the sitting-room, however, when there was a change in the manner of those present.

The man who had shown Buck to his room returned and said:

"A.I right, cap'n."

Then a wide plank in the ceiling was removed, a rope ladder fell to the floor and a man descended into the room.

A man of giant stature, long haired and bearded; dressed as a borderman and armed thoroughly, a man whom the reader has seen before.

"Well, I nearly smothered in that rat-hole, waiting for that fellow to go to bed," he said roughly.

Then turning to Aunt Venus who was present he continued:

"Bring my supper in here, Black Venus."

"And why was it necessary for you to hide from one man, Tom?" calmly asked the woman.

"Did he not tell you his name?"

"Yes, Taylor."

"It is Buck Taylor."

"So I heard Si Dunn whisper to Doc Barney, and he heard it too."

"You know now then, Valerie, why I hid from him?"

"No, I cannot guess why."

"He is but one man, though I admit one who looks every inch a man and who could be a dangerous foe, or good friend."

"I rather liked his appearance."

"Well, I don't, and as I arrived only ten minutes ahead of him I had no time to tell you what happened at the settlements, and which that man, Buck Taylor, was the main mover in."

"When I tell you he is also known as the Saddle King, Wild Rider and the Lasso Demon, you may understand why he is to be feared, Valerie."

"Ah, yes, I know him under his border soubriquet better than by his own name."

"So that is the Saddle King, is he?"

"Yes."

"Well, he looks it; but here is your supper, and when you have eaten it tell us all about your trip."

The man laughed bitterly, but ate his supper and then turned to his wife and said:

"I never came so near death before in my life, as I did at Trail Crossing."

"I have feared trouble for you at your every visit there, Tom."

"Still I have to go; but I cannot curb my love for drink, it maddens me, and for once I met my match."

"Ah! can that be true?"

"I was overmatched in fact."

"And the man?"

"Left this room half an hour ago."

"Taylor?"

"Yes."

"I am interested, so tell me all about it," and the woman showed a strange interest to know what had happened, while Si Dunn asked:

"Does yer mean cap'n, that Buck Taylor was too many for you?"

"I can't believe it," Doc Barney responded.

"Maybe yer wasn't feelin' jist well, honey," Black Venus said in a scowling tone.

"I was never feeling better in my life, for I was drunk."

"I had just won considerable money, and I threw out a defiance I am given to when liquor makes a fool of me."

"But before, when I have done so, it was the man who took it up that led the funeral procession, while this time I very nearly did so."

"But you were not wounded, Tom?"

"No, Valerie."

"Pray relieve my suspense," the woman said, impatiently.

"Well, I had my revolver raised, ready to drop on the man I saw attempt to draw, when all of a sudden that Lasso Demon dropped his lariat over my arm and I was dragged to the floor and ironed in an instant, before I understood what happened."

"This is remarkable, Tom."

"It is true, and my pards chipped in to help me out, but it was no use, for he bettered Dead Beat Dick and put a bullet into Mustang Dan's wrist, and took me off a prisoner, for Monte Joe and others backed him up, and our few dared not be too brash."

"They would have rescued me that night had it not been for Monte Joe; but they tried it on the next day on the trail, and here I am."

"But how, Tom?"

"Well, they played Comanche, headed us off and showed up in three bands, ahead and in our rear."

"Taylor took my irons off, and said we would dash through, while, if it came to a hot fight, he would give me my weapons."

"That was manly in him."

"Bahl! don't say anything in his favor, Valerie, for I hate him worse than I do a snake, but it is my inning now."

"What do you mean?"

"I am telling you how I escaped."

"Yes, and I am anxious to know."

"We made a dash through, the Lasso Demon sing his rifle, and doing it well, too, when I turned and ran back to the party behind."

"When he saw me he stopped, close pressed as he was, and sent a shot at me that killed my horse."

"Then he got through, but had my men had rifles, he could never have run the gantlet he did."

"We put for the hills, planted our dead, and the men disbanded after leaving the range, I coming on here by slow trips, and here I find the Saddle King on my trail, coming in not ten minutes behind me."

"Now, do you believe he is alone; that is the question?"

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE PLOT.

IN response to the question of Tiger Tom, if Buck Taylor was alone, Si Dunn responded:

"He surely is, cap'n, for them dogs never barked when you come, as they know'd yer, and when they just got a scent of a stranger afar off, they at once let us know."

"Then he came to ther house, seein' ther light, and they gave cry ag'in."

"Now, ef he hed any pards with him, then they would let us know."

"That looks reasonable, Si."

"Did you not say he was alone, after you left him, Tom?"

"Yes, Valerie."

"Well, he has just come by here to see if you had returned, giving you good time to reach home, and wishing to see where and how you lived."

"But has he not trailed me, for he is one of the best trailers in Texas?"

"It may be."

"And he knows I am here."

"Perhaps he does."

"Then he has come here to attempt my capture?"

"It would look so, Tom."

"Then that settles it with him."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean to kill him, that is all."

"No."

"I say yes."

"See here, Tom, that man is in Government service, and if he disappears, mind you, I say disappears, then he will be looked up, his quarrel with you found out, and you will no longer be able to live in your home, and just when affairs seem brightening in our life."

"I shall kill him, Valerie."

"Of all the mistakes of your life, Tom, this will be the greatest one."

"Oh! I shall let it be thought the Comanches killed him."

"You cannot deceive the men who will be set to find out what his fate has been."

"If I do not kill him, he will kill me."

"No, why should he, now?"

"He has an idea that I am—well, you know who I mean, Valerie."

The woman's face paled at his words, and she said:

"Well, wait until he comes to kill, or arrest you, then act."

"He is here now for that purpose."

"I think not."

"Then why is he here?"

The woman was silent, and again Tiger Tom said:

"No one knows he has come here, if he is alone, and we could finish him in safety."

In an instant the woman was upon her feet, her eyes flashing, while she said, in a voice that was full of meaning:

"Dare to play that game and I will befriend him myself."

"No, if you are afraid to meet a man squarely, face to face, you shall not assassinate him in my presence!"

The ranchero was silent.

He did not show the tiger in his nature then, and the two cowboys seemed to stand in awe also of the fearless woman who had been so suddenly aroused to resentment.

"Well, Valerie, if you decide against me, I must yield," tamely said Tiger Tom, and his bearing carried out the assertion of the woman to Buck Taylor, that the ranchero "was as gentle as a woman toward her."

"Now you are acting as you should, Tom, for the Saddle King is not a man to be killed from an ambush, for then the Government would avenge him, mark my words."

"If you think he has comrades with him, let Si and Doc make a complete circuit of the place, each carrying a dog with him, and returning before dawn."

"After breakfast he will go on his way, mark my words, and there will be no reason to dread him more."

The ranchero gave a quick glance at the two cowboys, and replied:

"Then you two can make a scout around the ranch, and see if there is anything suspicious about."

"I will go and see you off, and then return to rest, for I am worn out."

He went out with the two men, and once away from the house, he said:

"That man must die!"

"Yes, cap'n," was the reply of each.

"But not here."

"No, cap'n."

"I will leave the house before dawn, and will take position at Red Rock Spring, for he must go that way."

"He's sure to," said Si.

"You, in case he should go by the Cave

Trail, strike for there as soon as he leaves the ranch, but he must see you here when he leaves."

"Yes, cap'n."

"If he passes Red Rock Spring in safety, then you look out for him at the Cave."

"I'll be there, cap'n," said Si.

"Me, too, cap'n," Doc answered.

"He must never pass those two points."

"No, indeed."

"But what shall we tell ther madam, cap'n?"

"That the cattle have strayed, and you are going after them."

"All right, cap'n, we'll git thar."

And back into the cabin went Tiger Tom, while the two cowboys each took a dog with him, and on foot made a scout around the ranch, to meet at the ridge near where it joined the range, and to come in together before dawn and arouse the ranchero, so that he could depart, unless the presence of comrades of the Saddle King being about was discovered.

"I will leave the place just before dawn, Valerie," said Tiger Tom.

"But why?"

"Well, I wish to be away when Buck Taylor gets up and starts."

"You can keep in your room there, and he would not know it."

"True, if he made no search; but I believe firmly that he has comrades near, for brave as he is, he would not dare come here alone."

"Well, where will you go?"

"To one of my retreats, and one of the boys can come and tell me if he starts away all right."

"Well, you know best, Tom; but I cannot understand why you should fear that one man as you do, when you have been wont to often terrorize a whole crowd and never count odds."

"Have you forgotten that I told you he charged me with being Tom Trescott, and he saw this brand upon my wrist."

"If I am taken, I hang, for there will no mercy be shown the man whom they arrest as Tom Trescott."

The woman was silent a moment and then said in a low tone:

"I can understand your dread now, Tom."

"You must indeed keep clear of the Saddle King."

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE DEPARTURE.

BUCK TAYLOR slept well in spite of his surroundings, and when he awoke found the sun was up.

He made his toilet, and stepping out upon the piazza that surrounded the cabin on all sides, found there Mrs. Tracey, seated in an easy-chair and reading.

She greeted him pleasantly and looked even more beautiful than she had the night before, for she wore a jaunty dress of buckskin, with a beaded cap that was very becoming.

"I hope you rested well, Mr. Taylor?" she said sweetly, and then as she saw the cowboy chief gazing at the scenery, she asked:

"Have we not a fine view from here?"

"You have indeed, madam."

"And what a fine position for a fort."

"Yes, and I think it was once an Indian stronghold, as there are traces about that lead to the belief, as well as its having once been a Spanish mission, for our cabin is built on the walls of what appeared to have been once a chapel."

"Doubtless it was, for there are a number of ruins about of the old Spanish missions, and this was surely a most secure place for one."

"There is a beautiful spring here too, a natural corral in the rear for cattle, and the land is fertile so that we have an excellent garden."

"I never tire of the place, Mr. Taylor, and sit here for hours enjoying the scenery."

"Still you must be lonely, as Mr. Tracey is so much away from home."

"Oh, no, you are in error, for he is seldom away from home, and left only ten days ago for a run to the settlements, where I never care to have him go, for he has many enemies and is sure to make more; but these people do not know him as he is in his home life, and judge him by what he is when under the influence of wine, for I am sorry to say he will go upon his periodical sprees."

Buck Taylor was silent. Could he have misunderstood the man?

Was he really the one he had charged him with being?

Or, was he unknown in his real life to his beautiful wife?

His home was a pleasant one, when he had been led to believe it a mere hovel.

He found there a beautiful woman, a lady of refined taste and hospitable, where he had not deemed such a thing possible.

Two unobtrusive, though villainous looking cowboys alone seemed to have charge of the cattle, and an old negress presided over the kitchen.

There were half a dozen savage-looking dogs lying about, but they showed no fierceness toward him, as their mistress accepted him as a guest.

So Buck Taylor confessed to himself that he was puzzled, that he did not understand the

situation at "Mission Hill Ranch," as Valerie had told him the place was called.

Seeing the two cowboys coming from the corral, Mrs. Tracey said:

"Your horse has been well cared for, Mr. Taylor, and now we will go in to breakfast.

"But if you are in no hurry to be on your way, pray remain as long as it suits your pleasure."

This did not look like an anxiety to get rid of him, Buck thought; but he was not one who took all by appearances.

The breakfast was a good one, well cooked and served, and the cowboy chief enjoyed it immensely.

He felt a little ashamed of himself for accepting hospitality in the house of a man whom he was willing to send to the gallows, and whose death would bring grief to the lovely woman who seemed so much wrapped up in her desperate husband.

But he had not expected such kind treatment and could only put up with it.

After breakfast Si brought his horse to the door, as he said he must go, and the Saddle King would have departed with many thanks and a formal farewell; but Mrs. Tracey stepped forward and offered her hand, while she said:

"I am glad to have known you, Mr. Taylor, and you must always stop when you come near us, for I wish you to meet my husband and be friends with him."

Buck felt his face flush, and muttered something, he did not remember afterward what, and then had to take Si's extended hand.

"Luck to yer, pard," said Si pleasantly.

"Says I ther same, pard, Doc Barney added as he came forward."

And springing lightly into the saddle he was about to ride away when Valerie called out:

"May I ask if you know a man in Government service, Mr. Taylor, who is known as the Saddle King?"

"I am called the Saddle King, Mrs. Tracy."

"Indeed! and the Lasso Demon, and Wild Rider too?"

"Yes, I have had a number of names given me by my comrades."

"Then you are Buck Taylor?"

"Yes, madam."

"How glad I am to know you, sir."

"Si said you must be, and seeing you mount as you did just now reminded me to ask you."

"We will see you again, Mr. Taylor?"

"Yes, madam, thank you," and raising his sombrero, Buck rode away.

"Well! so that is the home of the Tiger of Texas is it?"

"And that his wife?"

"If I had not seen what I did, and know just what that Tiger Tom is, I would never have believed it."

"Now he is deceiving that pretty wife of his, I am sure."

"But what a surprise it will be to him when he comes home and finds I have paid him a visit."

"I wonder if she would wish to see me again if she knew how I had roped her husband in?"

"By the Lone Star of Texas! but I have half a mind to lie in wait for Tiger Tom and never let him reach his home."

"No, he may not return for weeks, and I must get the Lasso League ready for the trail to break up the band of outlaws of the Branded Hand, for if Tiger Tom is not one of them, perhaps their chief, I am away off the trail."

"Now for the fort," and he rode on at a swifter pace, his horse having had a good rest.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE DOUBLE AMBUSH.

THE innate caution of the cowboy chief had saved his life on many an occasion, when, but for it, he would have ridden into a trap.

It was not fear, but self-protection, and where he would have sought big odds if it came to the scratch, he did not take chances where he would have to contend against an assassin.

So as he rode along Buck Taylor grew suspicious.

He had not seen the ranchero at his home, there was no indication that he had been there, and every reason to believe that he had not.

Yet after his escape from him why had he not returned at once?

If he had not, he might even then be watching about to see if he, Buck Taylor, was not laying a trap to catch him if he did return home.

If he was on the watch he had seen him go there, and would see him depart, and what more natural than that Tiger Tom would lie in ambush for him, for knowing the country as he did, he could readily head him off somewhere on his trail.

The Saddle King knew that part of the country but slightly.

He had been told just where Tiger Tom's ranch was located, and over two years before, he had passed near there, driving a herd of cattle, and been ambushed at Red Rock Spring, fifteen miles from Mission Ranch, by some Comanches.

Three of his cowboys had been killed, and himself and several others wounded.

So Buck Taylor remembered the Red Rock Spring, as his cattle too had been run off, and he and the balance of his comrades had barely escaped with their lives.

Three things the Saddle King pondered over as he rode along.

He would pass the Red Rock Spring he knew, following the trail to the fort, so he grew more and more cautious.

"Now I think of it, that was a night attack, and I wonder if they were really Comanches, or white men?" mused Buck.

"I am inclined to think that they were outlaws disguised as Indians."

"Well, I'll take a look at Red Rock Spring before I ride by it, for it is a place where many a poor fellow has lost his life."

So as he drew near the locality, the Saddle King turned off of the trail and soon found a hiding-place for his horse.

Then he went on foot, rifle in hand, by a flank movement to approach the spring.

Reaching a point of observation he peeped over into the valley, where the spring was located.

There was a pile of rocks, a few scattering trees and the spring wound down the hillside into a stream in the valley.

Putting his glasses to his eyes Buck Taylor uttered a whistle the moment he looked through them.

"Well, Holy Smoke!" he said in a way of exclamation.

"What good angel prompted me to turn from the straight path and take the crooked one?"

"There he is, as large as life, and twice as natural, just waiting for me to come along so that he can add to my weight by several ounces of lead."

"Now he knew I was at his house and must take this trail."

"I wonder if his wife and the cowboys, yes and the Black Venus and the dogs were in the secret!"

"Well, now to get the drop on Tiger Tom, for it has come to it, I guess."

He reconnoitered the position carefully through his glass, and at last discovered a ravine by which he could reach the rocks in the rear of the man lying in ambush.

"If I can reach that rock in his rear, then I have a case of drop on him."

So he made a circuit around to the ravine, crept up it to where it ended and then, peering through a bush, watched the spring.

Tiger Tom was hidden by the large rock, and was as carefully watching in the other direction for his victim to come along.

Across the open stretch Buck Taylor went, his rifle in hand, and gained the shelter of the rock.

Up this he crept, and there rested to collect his strength and nerve, for his trip had been a hard one, part of the time upon his knees.

Feeling sure of himself, he peered over the rock.

There was Tiger Tom, not twenty-five feet from him.

He stood by a crevice in the rocks, peeping through a hole which he had cut and placed there.

He had a rifle by his side, leaning against the rock, which came up to his chin, thus giving him a safe position and perfect view of the spring the other side of the rocks that shielded him.

The trail wound over a hill a hundred yards away, and ran straight to the spring, so that no man could escape a foe thus prepared for him.

But the place where he stood was shaped like a V, and behind him there was no protection.

The rock in his rear shielded Buck Taylor perfectly, and he could command the man who sought to get the drop on him.

In fact, Tiger Tom had not intended to dally with his man, but to kill him then and there.

He must never go back to the fort with the story he had to tell.

Thus was a double ambush formed, and the trap was to be soon sprung.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE TRAP SPRUNG.

TIGER TOM was nerved to the work before him.

With a man of his kind a life was nothing to him.

He would kill the cowboy chief, and that would end the feud between them.

He would arrange so that the cowboy would never be found near his ranch, but far away, and he would risk the idea that it would be found out that Indians did not kill him.

No, he knew his work too well to make a mistake.

The cowboy chief must die, and Indians would be accused of having slain him.

"I'll fix it if I have to kill several Indians and place them near him," he said savagely.

Keeping his eyes on the hill over which the trail wound, he said, as the time passed:

"Curse him! why don't he come?"

"I am here, Tiger Tom," was the unexpected answer of the Saddle King in his rear.

A yell broke from the lips of Tiger Tom as he dropped his hand upon his rifle to turn upon his foe, but quick as a shot the lariat of the Lasso

Demon was thrown, encircled his body, and he was dragged to the ground just as his captor, with a mighty leap, reached his side.

"I've got you again, Tiger Tom!"

"The Saddle King!" gasped the prisoner, his arms held tight to his side by the lasso coil, and lying upon his side as he had been dragged with the terrific jerk which Buck Taylor had given.

"The Lasso Demon this time, Tiger Tom, for I've got you without a shot."

"Curse you!"

"I heard you say so before, and wonder at my not coming."

"But I am here now."

As the Texan spoke he was winding his lariat closer, until he could disarm his prisoner.

This done he slipped upon his wrists the handcuffs which he took from his pocket, and which Tiger Tom had before made the acquaintance of.

Then he allowed his prisoner to rise, and said:

"Now come with me and show me where your horse is."

"I am on foot."

"Well, you shall walk while I ride; and I will keep a lively pace."

"My horse is yonder in the mesquite thicket," was the reply, as Tiger Tom did not like walking.

"All right," and Buck Taylor went in the direction spoken of, and there was the horse, hitched to a tree and muzzled.

"Now mount!"

The prisoner obeyed.

The feet of Tiger Tom were not bound, but once in his saddle Buck Taylor made his handcuffed wrists fast to the large saddle-horn.

Then he took the stake-rope and led the horse to where he had left his own animal.

"Where are you going?"

"To get my horse."

"Ah!" and the prisoner seemed relieved.

"You must be very cowardly to watch all the places you pass where a man could be ambushed," sneered the prisoner.

"I am, and it is well that I flanked the Red Rock Spring, or I would be dead now."

"I was not waiting for you."

"Who, then?"

"Comanches."

"Ah, yes, some of the kind who rescued you from me."

"They did not rescue me, for I ran to them, and, pretending to join them, they did not keep a guard over me after a day or so, and I escaped."

"Tiger Tom, does death turn an Indian white?"

"What do you mean?"

"Does a Comanche become a pale-face after he has passed in his checks?"

"I don't understand you."

"Well, my idea is that those were not Indians."

"You think so?"

"I feel pretty sure of it, for they did not have bows and arrows, lances or rifles, only revolvers."

"That is no sign."

"Well, I believe they were men from the settlement whom you paid to rescue you."

And Buck Taylor cared not to say more, to give his prisoner an idea of all he knew, or that he suspected the men to belong to a band of outlaws.

"You are all wrong, for they were Comanches, and I was on my way home, when I saw signs of red-skins about, so I lay in ambush to wait and see if they came this way."

"Why not go to your house to aid in the protection of it?"

"I was on my way there."

"The other night you spoke in border dialect, appearing like an uneducated man, and now you have forgotten to talk as you did then, so I am more than ever convinced that you are Tom Trescott."

"See here, Buck Taylor, I am not Trescott, though he was my friend."

"I have a happy home, and though I am desperate under the influence of liquor, I am not a bad man at heart."

"I will say more, that there is a very strong resemblance between the man Trescott and myself, and if I am taken to the fort, I will be strung up as the man you accuse me of being."

"You will indeed."

"Now, you are not a rich man, Taylor?"

"No, I am inconveniently poor, Tiger Tom."

"You have only your pay?"

"That is all, and a few cattle."

"Well, I'll give you in gold five thousand dollars if you will drop this idea that I am Trescott and let me go free."

"You could not bribe me to do that which I deemed wrong, Tiger Tom, for any sum you might name," was the stern rejoinder.

"Then my life be upon your head if I am hanged."

"So be it, for my life came devilish near hanging on your head just now."

"No, I've got you again, Tiger Tom, and shall take you to the fort."

"I shall tell Colonel Miles just what I believe, and leave him to decide what he will do with you."

"He will hang me."

"If he does not, I shall be very much surprised."

In a few minutes more they came to Buck Taylor's horse, and the latter mounted and started back upon the trail.

At Red Rock Spring the trail branched into two, and Tiger Tom eagerly scanned the face of his captor to see which he intended to take.

In fact, in his anxiety he said:

"The Cave Trail is the best one."

Buck Taylor gave him a sharp glance and replied:

"That is the one we shall take."

CHAPTER XXVII. ON THE CAVE TRAIL.

HAVING failed in his attempt to bribe the Saddle King, Tiger Tom tried another plan.

"Say, Buck Taylor!"

"Well?"

"I have been away from home some two weeks and on that spree in the settlements, so I don't feel just right, and it won't make but half a day's difference if you'll take me by home and let me get a clean outfit."

"I had the hospitality of your home last night, Tiger Tom, and I would not have the heart to go back there and have you as my prisoner."

"I could not look your good wife in the face."

"Oh, I'll explain to her that you are doing what you deem to be your duty."

"No, I'll not go."

"Wish you would."

"I'll rig you up in some of my togs when we get to the fort, for though you are a little larger man than I am, I guess you can wear them."

The prisoner looked disappointed.

He had planned a trap for the cowboy chief if he got him to his home.

Now the only chance he had was in his own two men, whom he had told to ambush the Cave Trail for the Saddle King, should he escape death at the Red Rock Spring.

Would they be upon the alert as they should be?

And would they effect his rescue?

Could they see that he was a prisoner, or would they not, seeing him riding along by the side of the cowboy chief, think their trouble had been amicably arranged?

Such were the thoughts that worried Tiger Tom as he went along with Buck Taylor.

Having bound his handcuffed hands to the saddle-horn the cowboy chief seemed to feel that he had his prisoner secure.

He did not even have his lariat fast to the horse ridden by the ranchero.

If Tiger Tom had spurred forward to escape, Buck Taylor knew that his own horse could overtake him, and if not, a bullet could.

The idea of his prisoner's escaping him never entered the Saddle King's mind.

But he had noted the look upon Tiger Tom's face, when the different trails came into question, so, for fear of trouble, he went along slowly and with the utmost caution.

The trail he was on got its name from passing through a canyon in which there were a number of caves, perhaps at some time the home of dwellers in caverns.

The trail would pass along the sides of the canyon in places where the stream flowing through it filled the space.

Such deviations from the bed of the canyon was along ledges in the steep sides of the cliffs, and herein were the caves.

To have gone by the other trail would have been to go fifty miles out of his way, and this Buck Taylor wished to avoid, having his prisoner along, especially as it would have taken him in dangerous proximity to the Comanches.

A halt for dinner and rest was made before entering the Cave Canyon, and this fretted Tiger Tom to such an extent that he could not eat the food the cowboy chief gave him.

"Those fools will get tired and leave the ambush," said the prisoner to himself.

But Buck Taylor seemed in no very great hurry, ate his dinner serenely, and then waited awhile afterward to give the horses a longer rest and time to crop a better supply of grass.

At last he said:

"You seem anxious to get on the way, Tiger Tom."

"I am naturally anxious to know what will be done with me."

"Let me quiet your suspense, if that is what worries you, by telling you that if Colonel Miles proves you to be the deserter Trescott you will be hanged."

"It is promising then."

"Yes, and there are men enough who have served with you to know whether you are the man or not."

"I remember him, as I said; but the man is dead."

"How do you know?"

"He was my friend, and after leaving the army came to my home, though I did not know until afterwards that he had killed the paymaster and robbed him."

"He told me he had had trouble with an officer and deserted to escape punishment, and so went on into Mexico, and one of my cow-

boys saw him killed there at a fandango, one night."

"And that is your reason for saying he is dead?"

"Yes."

"Well, I have better reasons for believing him to be alive."

"Hold up your left hand please, and let me see that india ink brand upon it."

"My left hand?" quickly asked the ranchero, and his faced changed color.

"Oh, yes, it is the right one, I remember now, for I saw it when you held your pistol raised, thus giving me a chance to lasso you," and Buck Taylor spoke as though he had not meant the left hand to note the effect upon the prisoner.

But he had failed to see the palm of his left hand, and Tiger Tom appeared to be very determined that he should not, though he held up the under part of his wrist for inspection, whereon had been pricked in india ink the lettering before referred to:

"T. T. FIFTH CAV. U. S. A."

"Yes, that is the same brand the man known as Tom Trescott had on his left wrist—"

"His right wrist."

"Ah! how do you know that?"

"Well, I have seen it, and he—"

"You told me that it was your name on his wrist."

"No, the same initials T. T. and the rest, for I was once in the Fifth Cavalry; but discharged at the end of my term of enlistment."

"I fear, Tiger Tom, you are getting deeper into the mire by your explanations."

"But come, we will go on our way now."

He aided his prisoner to mount, again bound his hands to the horn of the saddle, and leaping upon the back of his own horse once more set off on the trail.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

TWO SHOTS.

THE Cave Canyon was reached, and having passed through it once before, Buck Taylor remembered the way.

As they entered the canyon the face of Tiger Tom grew paler.

He knew that there was no hope for him did not his two men, Si Dunn and Doc Barney rescue him.

Had they, after all, taken the other trail, then he saw no avenue of escape.

He cast furtive glances behind him, before him, and on either side.

For once the iron-nerved man had no control over himself.

It was a ride of terror to him, amounting to horror.

His manner and look at last caused Buck Taylor to say:

"One would think you expected to ride into an ambush, from your looks, Tiger Tom."

"I am going to my death, as I know."

"If you cannot prove that you are not the man wanted, yes; but don't get nervous until you know what your fate is to be."

"I am not nervous, I am simply—"

He did not finish his sentence, for out of a cave up on the ledge rung two rifle-shots, and with a bound into the air the Saddle King's horse fell backward, crushing his rider beneath him.

At the first crack of the rifles the horse of Tiger Tom wheeled about in fright, and deep into his sides sunk the spurs, urging him on.

Back down the ledge he ran, while the two men who had fired the shots, believing their work well done, sprang out of the cavern where they had been lying in ambush, to be greeted by a couple of shots, one cutting open the cheek of Si Dunn, the other tearing through the fleshy part of Doc Barney's arm.

"Lordy! I'm hit hard," yelled Doc Barney, bounding to cover, while Si Dunn, with his cheek torn open, followed with the remark:

"Yes, he's not dead, but after us."

"Quick, pard, up the hill to our horses, for their cap'n hev escaped."

And away they fled like hunted foxes, leaping up the steep hillside until they came to a ledge where their horses were.

Mounting in hot haste they spurred on down the canyon after their leader, only too glad to escape from the man of whom they stood in such dread.

They dashed out of the Cave Canyon into the valley, along this at the full speed of their horses and at last came to Red Rock Spring.

A short halt was made here to water their horses and moisten their parched throats, and then they continued their way.

"The cap'n went along here lickety-split, Si."

"Yes, and we hain't goin' slow."

"No; but I guess the cap'n's horse will run clean home with him."

"I guesses so; but we kin see when we rise the hill."

They soon came to the summit of the ridge, overlooking the prairie and with the Mission Hill far in the distance.

And there, still scudding across the prairie, they saw the horse and rider.

His horse still ran on, and the rider was by no means sorry, as he was headed for home.

He had seen Buck Taylor go down, apparently killed or wounded, and a glance backward, ere he had turned a bend in the canyon, showed that he had fallen beneath his horse.

"Of course Si and Doc will finish him if he is not dead," he muttered, and then he heard two shots.

"That settles him, and they meant to be sure."

"But bound as I am I cannot stop this beast, so he will have to run all the way home."

And seated upon the piazza of her home, reading, Valerie beheld the horseman coming.

Quickly she sprang for the glass always kept hanging in loops upon the piazza, and a glance showed her that it was her husband.

"It is Tom, and how he rides!"

"He is not pursued that I can see."

"Yes, and his horse seems to have been pressed hard."

"I do not understand it."

"But why should he come from that direction?"

"It is that trail the Saddle King took and—"

She paused, and an angry flash came into her eyes.

"Has he laid in ambush for the Saddle King and killed him?"

"If so, there will be more trouble for him than he dreams of."

"I will soon know," and the face of the woman was now flushed with anger, a dangerous light shining in her eyes.

On came the horse, slackening his pace as he neared home, and as he drew nearer Valerie saw that he had been ridden desperately hard.

Up to the stockade gate he came and halted.

"Come, Valerie, you will have to let me in," called out the ranchero.

The woman walked quickly to the gate and threw it open, while she asked:

"And why could you not open it as usual?"

"Do you see my hands?"

"My God! you are in irons!" she cried, her face white now.

"Yes, and tied to the horn of my saddle."

"What has happened?"

"Untie my hands so that I can dismount from this tired horse—see how he pants."

"Yes, he is run down," and the woman began to untie the bonds that held the irons to the saddle-horn.

"Gently, Valerie, for my rough ride has rubbed the skin off of my wrists."

She soon had him free, aided him to dismount and led him upon the piazza where she gave him a seat, calling to Black Venus to bring some warm water and bandages.

"Lordy, Massa Tom, what ail yer?" asked Black Venus.

"I've been captured and put in irons, Venus, by the gentleman you were all so good to last night."

"Ah! the Saddle King?" cried Valerie, while Venus remarked:

"I know'd dere was de debble in dat gemman soon as I seen him, and I'se afeerd ter spend ther silber doller he gi'n me."

"The Saddle King did this?" sternly demanded Valerie.

"Yes, and yonder come Si and Doc and they can tell you how I am avenged for these irons," was the fierce response.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE COWBOY BRAND.

THE eyes of the ranchero, kept on the trail he had come, had discovered the cowboys coming at a gallop across the prairie.

He at once pointed them out to his wife, who said quickly:

"Ah! it was a three-banded game against one man, and an ambush as well?"

"Do you feel proud of your victory, Tom Tracey?"

"I feel safe at last."

"Well, how is it that you return in irons?"

"I shall have to explain it to the two men, so will tell you when they arrive."

"Then they were not with you?"

"Not when these were put on," and he held up his manacled hands.

"When were they with you?"

"They were in at the death."

"Then Buck Taylor has been killed?"

"Yes, and the boys killed him to rescue me."

"So now you have it."

"I cannot understand how one man can better you as that man has done."

"You will see when I explain."

"Well, I will hear the story that those men tell, and then decide what is to be done, for the killing of the Saddle King is the worst deed of your life, Tom."

"I did not kill him."

"It was done by your order."

"Pray wait and hear all, Valerie, before you condemn me."

"I tell you that I did not kill him, that the men rescued me from him, and when they fired my horse wheeled and ran home, for I was powerless to stop him."

The woman said no more then, and the ranchero soon after asked:

"Can you not free me from these irons?"

"I have no key to unlock them."

"Then try to pick them with a hairpin, or in some way, for my wrists are swelling and I am suffering."

"I will do all I can, Tom," and she went off to find something that would do.

But every effort to pick the spring clasp failed, and the ranchero said:

"A file alone will do it, and that will take nearly all night."

"But here come the men."

"Yes, and from appearances both bear the brand of the cowboy chief as well as you."

"How do you mean?"

"They are wounded."

"Wounded? So they are; but I am not."

"No, but you wear the iron bonds of the Saddle King, so his brand is upon the three of you."

Tiger Tom winced at this, but muttered:

"How on earth did they get wounded?"

They had now dismounted and came toward the piazza, one holding his hand to his cheek, the other supporting his arm as best he could.

"S y, what does it mean that you are wounded?" sternly asked the ranchero.

"The Saddle King did it, cap'n."

"Yes, tore my cheek open."

"And sent a bullet through my arm."

"I thought you killed him," cried Tiger Tom, in alarm.

"We thought so, too, cap'n, but he don't die easy, and when we showed ourselves out of the cave, here's what we got, and if the good lady will only help us we'll be thankful."

"Did you leave that man alive?" roared Tiger Tom, springing to his feet in a fury.

"We followed you away, cap'n, only you went faster than we did," ventured Si Dunn.

"Look at these irons on me!"

"I was bound to my saddle and my horse ran off with me, while you, after killing his horse, and severely wounding him, fled from him like two cowardly coyotes that you are!"

"Say, cap'n, look what we got, and as we had rescued you, we didn't want ter stay no longer."

"I wish to understand this, and then I will see what I can do to help you all," said the woman firmly.

"Well, Valerie, I will confess frankly that I wished to put that man out of the way, and I sent Si and Doc to ambush him at the Cave Canyon while I went on to Red Rock Spring."

"Well, he flanked the spring, came up in my rear and the first I knew of his presence was when I impatiently said, 'Why don't he come?' he answered from behind me:

"I am here."

"At the same moment he threw that lariat of his, which he aims in as deadly a way as he shoots, and so I was caught."

"He refused all bribes, and would not let me come home first, saying he had accepted my hospitality last night and would not have the heart to come back and make you wretched."

"He was considerate, Tom."

"Yes, and then he took me on with him, and I prayed that Si and Doc might be in position."

"And for once your prayer was answered," sneered the woman.

"It seems so," was the reply, the man never showing anger toward the woman.

"And then?"

"We were riding along side by side, when the boys fired from a cavern we had just passed, and a little above us on the hillside."

"Taylor's horse reared and fell backward upon him, and I am confident that his rider was also wounded."

"My horse wheeled and ran for home."

"Then I heard two shots and supposed the runaways here had finished the Saddle King, when lo! I find they were fired by him and they ran off."

"That is all, Valerie."

"No, that is but the beginning, for that man will never rest now until he has tracked you down, Tom, mark my word on that."

"He may be mortally wounded, Valerie."

"I think he is, ma'm," said Si.

"I think he got it where he lives, ma'm," Doc added.

"Well, I shall find out."

"You?"

"Yes."

"What do you mean?"

"I shall go and see, as soon as I have looked to these men's wounds, for Aunt Venus can file your irons off, Tom, while I am gone."

"But, Valerie, you must—"

"I am going to say no more."

"Now, Si Dunn, let me see how badly you are marked for life."

She dressed the torn cheek as well as she could, then looked to the wound of Doc Barney, the bullet having cut through his arm, but not touching the bone.

Then she showed Black Venus how to use a file upon the handcuffs, and mounting her horse rode away at a gallop upon her mission, and a grand-looking creature she looked too, superbly mounted as she was, dressed in a buckskin riding habit, a sombrero sheltering her head, and

with a belt of arms strapped about her slender waist, a rifle slung at her back.

She was a woman to dare much, one to admire, one to fear as well.

CHAPTER XXX.

A CLOSE CALL.

BUCK TAYLOR had been suspicious of some trap ever since his capture of the ranchero.

Knowing that he had been supported by a score of men in the rescue from him, he could not believe that he was actually alone there upon the prairie, and that so near his home.

If there were others, he knew he would have to take his chances, and so he continued on his way with his prisoner.

The manner of his prisoner also caused him to be the more doubtful of him.

Still he had only to keep on his way and trust to luck and his own caution.

He was watchful ahead of him, when entering the Cave Canyon, and his eyes had fallen upon the very cavern in which the two cowboys were ambushed.

The ranchero, however, was riding on the side next to them, and they dared not fire from the front, and so waited until the two had ridden past.

Then they quickly stepped out, Si Dunn saying quickly:

"You take aim at his head, Doc, and I'll hunt for his heart."

"All right, pard."

"Is you ready?"

"Yes."

"Let go!"

The shots followed in quick succession, but with a different result from what they had looked for and hoped would be the case.

Whether their nerves were unstrung, or they were fearful of hitting the ranchero I do not know; but the bullet of Doc hit the horse ridden by Buck in the head, and Si's shot, only, told upon the rider.

Buck Taylor felt a stinging sensation in his shoulder, and his arm dropped to his side useless, while his horse reared and fell backward, pinning him to the ground.

Wounded as he was, and with such a sudden fall of his horse, quickly too though he tried to save himself, he fell heavily and saw his prisoner dash away without the power to check him.

But as quickly as he could get his hand upon a revolver he did so and turning beheld his intended assassins show themselves.

His position was a cramped one, and he had to lean over and fire upward with his revolver upside down, but his aim was by no means bad, as has been seen, and had not the two assassins gotten out of range as soon as they did, they would have found his firing improve with practice.

That they had run off utterly, Buck Taylor could not believe, and he hastened to free himself and seek a shelter from whence he could stand them off.

His horse was dead, and lying upon his left leg, while he was bruised by his fall as well, and wounded.

How seriously he was hurt he did not know, but he was glad to feel that his arm was only temporarily benumbed by the shot, for he could raise it now.

With great exertion he freed himself from the weight of the horse, and seizing his rifle limped to shelter in a cavern near.

He waited a long time, and no enemy appearing he began to look to his injuries.

"Can my shot have hurt them both seriously, or have they run off?" he asked himself.

"At any rate, I must see just how I am hurt."

He drew off his hunting-coat, and slitting his sleeve with his knife, looked at the wound.

It was in his shoulder, and he was glad to see that the bullet had cut on through the flesh and was not lodged in the arm.

"It struck the bone and glanced."

"It was the shock that paralyzed my arm for a few minutes."

"I guess it is not serious, and I'll bind it up as soon as I can get to my saddle-pockets."

"My leg is all right, except for being bruised and the bark knocked off in places, and my arm is skinned."

"Why, I'm not much the worse for the racket, though my horse, poor fellow, my good friend, you have gone on your trail to the great beyond."

"Now to see if I can reach my horse without being killed by an unseen foe."

He made the attempt and no shot came.

So he stripped his horse of his saddle and bridle and returned to the cavern.

He had his haversack of provisions and roll of blankets, and in the saddle-pocket was his little leather roll in which he kept some lint, liniment, extract of witch hazel and a few medicines.

These came in well now, and he bound up his wound as well as he could, and then looked to what he called his "larked" leg and arm.

His next move was to go out on a scout.

He made his way to where the shots had come from.

There he saw where the two men had been, and there were red stains upon the rocks.

These he trailed to where the two horses had been hitched, while waiting for their riders to do their murderous work.

The trails of the horses led down the canyon toward the valley.

"They went on the jump, too," he muttered, with a grim smile.

"Now I am on foot and a long way from home."

"I could go back to Tiger Tom's and get a horse from his corral to-night—no, I forgot those noisy dogs, for they would betray me."

"I guess I'll have to hoof it to the fort, and I am not in the best condition for walking, either."

"My poor horse, I am sorry to part company with him, for we were dear pards, were we not, old fellow?" and he stooped and patted the glossy neck of the dead horse, affectionately.

"We have gone on many a trail together, old pard, but they got you at last, as they will some day get me, I reckon."

"But I'll avenge you, Friend, and if there was earth enough in this rocky canyon to bury you, the wolves should never make a meal off you."

"But I can do nothing, old fellow, and right here we part forever."

His voice quivered as he uttered the words, and again placing his hand caressingly upon the head of the dead animal, he swung the bridle and saddle over his back and went limping slowly along on the long trail before him.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE SADDLE KING AFOOT.

OUT of the Cave Canyon the cowboy chief made his way slowly, for he walked with considerable pain.

He found a good camping place, near a brook and just off the trail.

There was plenty of wood near, and so he decided to go into camp though the sun was yet some distance above the horizon.

So he arranged his camp to suit his ideas of comfort, gathered some wood and built a fire, and then prepared to cook supper, when he stopped suddenly, seized his rifle and sought cover among the rocks.

"Maybe that gentleman will lend me his horse if I ask him in the right way," he said, grimly, as the clatter of hoofs reached his ears, and coming through the canyon.

He was not over a hundred yards from the trail, up the side of the hill just under a cliff which was heavily wooded.

His position was a good one to defend against half a dozen foes, and as there was a tiny brook coming out from under the cliff, and his haversack was well supplied with provisions, he said to himself that he could stand a few days' siege. Louder sounded the clatter of hoofs, sending many an echo among the rocks, which to an inexperienced ear would have sounded like a large cavalcade approaching.

But the cowboy chief knew that there was but one horse and he smiled to himself as he thought that he now had an opportunity to get a mount.

He's one of Tiger Tom's pards of course, maybe the Satan himself, so of course that is my horse."

Another moment and there came out of the canyon the horse and rider.

Then Buck Taylor gave a low whistle of surprise.

"It's Tiger Tom's beautiful wife, as I live!"

"Now where is she going?"

The woman answered the question by drawing rein and gazing down at the trail.

There was earth there and the tracks of the cowboy chief were discernible to one who could follow a trail.

"She is trailing me, that is certain," said the Saddle King.

Then the woman stopped, glanced up the hillside and saw the smoke curling upward above the rocks.

Instantly she turned off the trail up toward the camp.

"Now, what does she want, I wonder?"

"Is she mad, and after me to avenge her husband?"

"I hope not, for I would not know just how to meet a woman on the war-path."

Before he could say more the woman came to a halt and cried out:

"Ho the camp!"

"Yes, Mrs. Tracey, can I be of any service to you?" and Buck Taylor stepped into view.

She rode on then and Buck watched her closely to see if she had drawn a weapon.

Riding up close to where he stood she said:

"So we meet again, Mr. Taylor?"

"Yes, Mrs. Tracey, and sooner than I expected we would."

"I told you we would meet again some day."

"Yes, I remember."

"I saw your horse back upon the trail in Cave Canyon."

"Poor fellow, he is dead."

"Do you know who shot him?"

"The glance I got at the men who tried to murder me was only long enough for a quick

aim, and I would hardly know them again; except I left my brand on them."

"Why did they seek to murder you?"

"Wanted me out of the way, I suppose, Mrs. Tracey."

"Were you alone?"

"Well no, I was not, for I had a prisoner with me."

"Have you seen him?"

"Yes, he came home, wearing your bracelets."

"Ah! then you now know there is war between us?"

"I do, and I regret that upon his part it was not carried on openly."

"You are aware then that I was ambushed?"

"Yes, and I congratulate you upon not having been killed, or wounded."

"Well, I escaped with my life, but I did get a shot in my arm, and a bruised leg, for I find it hard to walk."

"Poor fellow! allow me to see how seriously you are hurt, for I am a good nurse, and have had considerable experience with wounds."

She did not await his answer, but leaped from her horse and approached him.

"You are indeed hurt, and I will dress your wound for you."

"I am glad it is no more serious."

"So am I, thank you."

"And you had started to tramp to the fort lame as you are?"

"Well, as I could not ride I concluded to walk," said Buck with a smile.

"No, you must take my horse."

"Your horse?"

"Yes."

"I would not think of such a thing."

"But you must."

"And you?"

"It is only about fifteen miles back to my home and I can walk, so you must obey me."

"Mrs. Tracey, when I first saw you I wondered how it was that you were—pardon me if I say it—allied to such a man as Tiger Tom, for I looked upon you as a true woman."

"Your kindness to me proves I was not mistaken, and, for your sake I regret that it is war between your husband and myself."

"All that he is I feel sure that you do not know; but though I tell you that there will be war to the knife between us, I promise you it shall be open and square on my part, and I warn you now, if he is as dear to you as he seems, that your way to save his life is to get him out of Texas, for I never let up on a trail I have vowed to follow to the end until I keep my vow."

He spoke in an earnest tone, that impressed the woman, for she said:

"I know you will do what you deem your duty, and I can ask no more; but you will take my horse?"

"No, under no circumstances."

"Then good-by," and she held out her hand.

He took it and led her to her horse, lifted her to her saddle, and without another word she rode away.

"Well, she's a strange one, and I pity her," mused Buck, as he saw her enter the canyon at a gallop.

CHAPTER XXXII.

IN THE SADDLE.

BUCK TAYLOR pondered long over the strange visit of the mysterious woman.

Why had she come?

What purpose had she gained?

Had she come as her husband's envoy?

She had seen Tiger Tom, of course, after his flight from the canyon.

Had she seen those who had ambushed him?

And who were they?

The brain of the cowboy chief was busy in turning over these questions, which he could not answer.

At last he came to the conclusion that the woman had come from Tiger Tom, to see if he was dead.

Yet her manner had been friendly toward him, though that of course could be assumed.

"Well, she has been here, and though she found me a trifle used up, she knows that I can yet defend myself."

"Now the next thing will be a visit from Tiger Tom and his pards, to wipe me out."

"Well, I am too lame to push on, and if I did they would overtake me."

"So I guess I had better go into siege right here, as I could find no better place."

"Fortunately now I have no horse to look after, for there is no place here for one; but then if I had a horse I could be far away by morning."

"As it is it is a fight or foot-race, and as I am not in good running condition, and there is still some little fight left in me, I guess I'll stay right here."

"Still I'll strengthen the works," and with this resolve he began to fortify the position he held by bringing what rocks, wood and dirt he could collect, and piling it up in a way to protect him in his little fort.

A wild turkey just then came sailing over and lighted near him, and instantly his revolver

cracked, and he walked over and picked up his game.

"Shot through the head, so my nerve stands me well yet," he said.

"Now I am provisioned well for a siege," he added a moment after, as he began to pick the feathers from the turkey.

His blankets were then opened, his oilcloths stretched over them for shelter, wood was piled on the fire, as night was coming on, and he swung his turkey up to roast, while he ate his supper.

When the turkey was well roasted, he put it aside, covered the fire with ashes, and having taken a look down toward the trail, turned in.

For several hours he slept, and then awoke with a start.

With that instinct, which becomes almost as keen as a dog's in men who sleep with their lives in their hands, he felt that there was some one near.

He crept to his position of defense, rifle in hand, and waited.

No sound came to him, yet still he knew that some one, or something, was not far away.

"It may be a bear," he muttered, to add a moment after:

"And it may be Tiger Tom."

"Well, I can be as patient as he is."

And there he sat, awaiting for some sign of a foe.

Soon he heard the breaking of a twig, yet he did not start, for he expected it.

He simply strained his eyes the harder to pierce the darkness.

Then he heard heavy steps, yet he made no sign.

If Tiger Tom and his men had come to kill him, they would find him ready to defend himself.

His wounded arm felt sore, and his leg was stiff and painful, yet he did not heed either.

He was a man used to too hard knocks to care for anything that he considered so slight as his injuries, when many other men would have been half-dead under them.

So the hours passed, and every now and then a heavy tread told him that he must keep on the watch.

At last the gray of dawn was visible in the east.

It brightened very slowly the horizon, but his vision extended now as far as the trail.

Then he beheld the outline of a form.

It was not human, but equine in shape.

"Yes, it is a horse; but now for the rider," he muttered.

But no rider was visible, and as the skies brightened, and the sun peering over the range sent its rays down among the shadows of the valley, Buck Taylor saw that the horse was tied by his stake rope to a tree just off the trail and up toward his camp a dozen paces.

"Where is his rider?"

That question could not be answered.

Had the rider camped there and was still asleep?

It seemed so, and the cowboy chief was about to go out and reconnoiter when he happened to think that it might be a trick of his foes to lead him out of his lair.

Glancing at the animal more closely he saw that it was a handsome black, with long body, clean limbs and some sixteen hands high.

"I do believe that it is the horse that Tiger Tom's wife rode here last night."

"Yes, there is something white tied about his neck."

"I'll take chances to find out."

With this he limped down the hill, his rifle ready to fire at an instant's notice.

The horse greeted him with a neigh of delight, and as he reached his side he broke a string tied around his neck and to which was attached a paper.

Upon the paper, written in a feminine hand was the following:

"As you refused to take my horse last night, I bring him back and leave him for you, assuring you that I am well mounted still for my ride back to my home."

There was no name, but the cowboy chief did not need one, and from his lips the words came with fervent utterance:

"Heaven bless that woman, and have mercy upon the soul of her guilty husband if ever I lay hands upon him again!"

Then as he patted the horse in a kindly way he said:

"And you too are my friend, old pard."

"Yes, I can once more claim to be the Saddle King!"

He then staked the horse out where he would find good grass, returned to his camp and cooked breakfast, and an hour after was mounted and on his way to the fort, suffering still yet cheerful at being once more in the saddle.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE SADDLE KING'S MISSION.

THOUGH his horse was as fine a one as he could wish for, Buck Taylor rode slowly, as he suffered considerable pain from every jolt he received.

Still he was able to get along at a rate of twenty-five to thirty miles a day, and very quickly realized that had he been on foot he would have had to lay by until he got able to travel.

"It was a close call, but I am in luck that it is no worse," was, his philosophical way of looking at his situation.

But the more he pondered upon the strange woman of Old Mission Ranch, the less he understood her.

When he had naturally supposed she would have been his enemy, after knowing of the quarrel between himself and her husband, she had instead been his friend.

That she had dared come by night on the long ride from the ranch, and bring her horse to him, going back alone, for he had noticed that there was but one track back again, after leaving the animal hitched to the tree, showed that she was a woman of nerve and will above the average.

"Now it's just what my Girl Pard Belle would have done, but I didn't think another of her rare pluck could be found in the same State," said the Saddle King.

So on he went, camping for rest when he ended it, and caring for his hurts all he could, until at last Fort D— came in sight.

The fort was well situated upon the banks of a stream, that ran into palisades at its location, and beyond were prairie lands with the richest verdure for cattle.

In the rear were lowland meadows and hills heavily wooded, so that the situation was well chosen for a Government post and ranch as well, for there were kept thousands of cattle.

Two guns of a light battery, a battalion of infantry and two companies of cavalry comprised the military force at the fort.

Then there were a dozen scouts and hunters, guides, and some sixty odd cowboys, the last under the leadership of the Saddle King.

Many of the officers had their families with them, and as there was a post store at the fort, it brought thither settlers and traders from many miles around.

The commandant, Colonel Miles, was a dashing officer, who had won his spurs as an Indian-fighter, and who inspired confidence in all.

Buck Taylor had asked permission to form his cowboys into two companies, each under its respective captain, and these had been well drilled in certain maneuvers by a cavalry officer at the fort.

They could fire their rifles from horseback on a charge, make a rush with reins loose and a revolver in each hand, and together wield their almost as deadly lariats, until the "Cowboys' League," and "Lasso League," as they were called, were known as a very daring and dangerous foe to put upon the trail.

They had their private signals, their calls, their battle-cry and countersigns, and were governed by laws as binding as death.

A red flag with a gold star embroidered in it, a gift from Belle Hassan, Buck Taylor's Girl Pard, was their colors, and the same was embroidered upon the sombrero of each of the sixty-five men that made up the Lasso League.

With perfect confidence in his two captains, the Saddle King, after a talk with Colonel Miles, had ventured away on a lone scouting expedition for an indefinite time.

There was known to be a band of secret raiders, either coming from Mexico or having their haunts on Texan soil, who always managed to steal horses, cut out a small herd of cattle, loot a wagon-train or dash in upon a settlement just at a time when the Comanches were keeping the troops very busy watching them.

All efforts to get at the truth of just who these raiders were had been unavailing, for the best scouts had failed to locate their retreats, or to discover who they were.

Their movements were silent until they struck, and their going as mysterious as their coming.

The cattle or horses they captured would be scattered into a score of separate bands, and soon after the same herd would be resold in the lower grazing country, and driven up to where they had been stolen from.

So it was that Buck Taylor made up his mind to ferret out this outlaw band, for he began to dread a raid upon the tempting ranch of Captain Ned Hassan, where thousands of cattle were to be had, and the house was full of rich booty for the outlaws.

Then, too, the capture of either Belle or her mother by the raiders would bring from Captain Hassan a most generous ransom for their restoration.

It was true that the captain kept a most daring band of cowboys, some thirty in number, yet the raiders had often shown up in larger force, and by a rapid night dash could reach the ranch and return to safety before the settlers could be assembled to beat them off, and a surprise would take the cowboys of Soldier's Retreat at a disadvantage.

"These outlaws must be found out and then hunted down," was the decision that Buck Taylor arrived at in his own mind.

And upon this he sought a private interview with Colonel Miles.

The colonel felt a pride in his chief of cowboys

and his gallant men, for they were held under the discipline of soldiers, and though wild, terrible fellows in the saddle, were easy to control in camp.

He was aware also that both the Indians and outlaws stood in more terror of the Lasso League than of all his soldiers, for the cowboys when they caught a man in mischief were wont to hang him first and try him afterward.

They were wont to show no partiality, and their lassoes were always ready to use as a hangman's rope, while it seemed even on the prairies a tree always grew conveniently near for their work.

"Well, my gallant cowboy captain, what can I do for you?" was Colonel Miles's reception of Buck Taylor when he visited him by special appointment asked for.

"Colonel, I have come to ask you to let me go on a lone scout of an indefinite time, and my purpose is to ferret out the head and front of this outlaw band of raiders," and the cowboy chief placed his plan before the commandant.

Colonel Miles listened with deep attention and then said:

"Taylor, it is just what I was going to ask you to do, and I have here a plan of action for you to carry out."

And so it was that the Saddle King disappeared from the fort one night and turned up a week after at Trail Crossing to take up Tiger Tom's defiance.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE RETURN FROM THE MISSION.

BUCK TAYLOR had wished to reach the fort at night.

He was not anxious to be seen "stove up worse than an old cowboy horse," as he expressed it to himself.

But a storm was threatening, and as he could reach the fort before night by pressing on he decided to do so.

His wound was not so sore now, and his leg was improving, for he had tenderly nursed both in the few days he had been on the trail to the fort.

He was recognized by the sentinel and admitted, while others who had heard of his coming gathered to meet him, as considerable anxiety had been felt at the fort by his friends, especially his cowboys, about his absence.

So he was greeted with a cheer by the soldiers, with all of whom he was popular, and with a yell by his lasso-throwers.

That he did look "a little tough," as one said, he admitted; but he added with a laugh:

"I am still on deck boys."

"Yes, but on the deck of a different craft from the one yer went away on, Cap'n Buck," and the man pointed to his horse.

"Yes, I have changed horses; but how do you like this one?"

"Looks prime, but ther proof o' ther puddin' are ther eatin'."

"Well, he's a good one, and I prize him the more highly because he was given to me by a lady."

"A leddy! see here, Cap'n Buck, petticoats is a goin' ter be ther ruin o' you yet."

"I were a fool onst myself about a girl crittur," and lariatd her fer life as I thought; but Lord bless my honerary old hide, she showed ther cloven hoof afore I c'd corral her and stamped with another as big fool as I was; in fact he were such a durned ignoramus it hurt him ter live as I know'd, so I put him out o' his misery, and that left me free ter come ter Texas on ther jump, and here I stays."

"Give me a buffalo bull, a Texas steer, or a mustang ter break in, but nary woman, for I knows 'em, I does."

"Don't be a fool, cap'n, about no woman."

A burst of laughter greeted this homily upon woman from a cowboy, and Buck made his way to headquarters to report to Colonel Miles.

The colonel saw him enter, one arm in a sling, his costume much the worse for hard usage, and with a decided limp, but with a smiling face, in spite of his haggard look from suffering and loss of sleep.

"I am glad to see you, Taylor, but you look as though you had been through a thrashing machine."

"Nothing serious, I hope?"

"Oh, no, sir, only a flesh wound in my arm, and a bruised leg from my horse falling upon me, for he was shot."

"So bad as that?"

"It came near being much worse, colonel."

"Well, I am glad that it is not; but you have suffered, as I can see now I get a closer look at you and the surgeon must take you in charge at once."

"I am on the mend, sir, thank you, but will look the surgeon up after I have made my report."

"You have met the enemy, I take it?"

"Yes, sir, I met him, captured him, had him rescued from me, recaptured him, and he was again rescued, and I was left all broke up," said Buck, with a smile.

"I am interested to know all you have been through, Taylor."

"Well, colonel, I'll begin by telling you that I started in to find the man you gave me the

description of, Tom Trescott, and if I am not very much mistaken, I found him."

"I am glad of that."

"If the man I took for him is not the deserter, then he is his double, as far as I could make it out, and a terror as well."

"I found my man in Trail Crossing."

"That is a place that should be wiped out."

"There are some good men there, sir, and true; but it is a little hives in itself, take it altogether."

"I found a man there who tops me by two inches in height, and some twenty pounds in weight."

"And your fighting height and weight is, I believe, six feet four in moccasins, and two hundred and twenty pounds without your weapons?" said the colonel, with a smile.

"Yes, sir; but that man runs up into the air six feet six, and weighs fully two hundred and forty, and a finer specimen of physical manhood I never saw."

"He is as quick as a wild cat in his movements, and I guess as ugly."

"He has a handsome face, wears a full beard and long hair, but there is more distilled deviltry in his countenance than in a whole family of Comanches."

"He is a walking arsenal with a young sword for a bowie knife and two revolvers upon each hip, not to speak of a rifle he carries when mounted."

"Then he rides like a cowboy, has a splendid horse, and adds to a graveyard he has in Trail Crossing whenever the opportunity presents itself for him to turn a man's toes up toward the prairie flowers."

"A vivid description, Taylor, of a very remarkable man, who in size and nature at least, resembles Trescott."

"Yes, sir, and concluding that two of such a kind were not common, and learning of his record, I decided to rope him in."

"A bold undertaking alone."

"Well, sir, he gets wild with drink, gambles, and had just won a large pile of money, which made him over-estimate himself, and as usual, he jumps upon a bench, on such occasions, holds a revolver above his head, and declares that he is a man with a price upon his head, dead or alive, and defies any one to take him."

"Ah! that is his style, is it?"

"Yes, sir, and there are men who have felt interest enough in the amount named to attempt to earn it."

"But they failed?"

"There is a row of them lying in the Trail Crossing burying-ground, colonel, and over them he has had the kindness to place a sign-board on which is painted in red letters—here it is sir:"

"SACRED TO THE MEMORY

OF

"THOSE WHO SOUGHT TO EARN THE REWARD ON 'TIGER TOM'S' HEAD."

"Called unexpectedly from earth, may they strike the right trail to the Happy Hunting-Grounds. This tribute is erected to their misplaced zeal by

"THE TIGER OF TEXAS."

The colonel had taken the card handed him by the cowboy chief and read it with an interest which his face revealed very decidedly.

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE SADDLE KING'S RESOLVE.

"AND this you copied, Taylor, from the board over this Tiger Tom's victims?" said the colonel sternly.

"I did, sir."

"How many men were buried there?"

"Seven, sir."

"And he runs at large in Trail Crossing?"

"He owns a ranch, sir, far to the southward, and in the most exposed of positions, where the Comanches could make an attack on him at any time."

"Is he in league with them?"

"That is what I am going to find out, sir."

"But is he a ranchero?"

"Yes, sir, he has as comfortable a home as there is on the border, and his wife lives there with him."

"His wife?" asked Colonel Miles in surprise.

"Yes, sir, but I am telling you of my discoveries in confidence, colonel, as I have just begun my work."

"I shall so consider all you say, Taylor."

"Thank you, sir; but the wife of this man is young, scarcely over twenty, and as beautiful a woman as I ever saw."

"You are a good judge, I have heard, Taylor."

Buck's face flashed, for he knew that it was said that he had an eye always open to a pretty face.

"Well, colonel, this woman is beautiful in face and form, and you shall hear all about her that I know."

"The ranch is built on the ruin of an old mission, and two cowboys and a negress by the name of Black Venus, are all that I could discover there."

"The place is upon a lone hill, surrounded by

a rocky ridge a mile long, with a rugged range in the rear."

"There is a fine spring there, and but one approach up the hill, and that could be held by half a dozen men against fifty."

"The cabin is like a fort, but comfortable and well furnished, as I said."

"The woman has a flower-garden there, she plays the guitar, sings splendidly and paints and sketches well, if I may be considered a judge, and I do know a steer from a buffalo in a painting."

"Then there is a vegetable garden, some prairie land fenced in for hay, a corral in the rear of the house, chickens and cows to give it a home look, and they really live there, colonel, as I know, for I sampled the cooking of Black Venus."

"The man has several hundred head of cattle, too, and about half a hundred horses, not a mean hoof among them."

"With such a home and wife, the man ought to behave himself."

"Yes, sir, but he loves a spree, and turns up in Trail Crossing and other places every three months on a grand picnic of his own getting up."

"I caught him on one of these, and having read his record in the graveyard, I concluded to rope him."

"I corraled him at the saloon, just as he got up for his little speech of defiance, and telling about the reward upon his head."

"I saw, as he held up his right arm, in india ink on his wrist, the letters 'T. T., Fifth Cavalry, U. S. A.'"

"Aha! Tom Tascott, as I live!"

"I decided that it was, sir, and while he was looking for some man to draw a revolver, I dropped my lariat over his upraised arm, hauled him off the bench with a tumble, and got my foot on his neck and revolver into his face before he realized that he had been roped in."

"A bold capture, indeed, Taylor, and you deserve credit for it."

"No, sir, I held the best hand, just then, and played to win."

"He had pards there, too, who took up for him at once, but I used my lariat on one gent known as Dead Beat Dick, and was backed up by a square fellow they called Monte Joe the Gambler, and who took up my fight for me with another fellow who chipped in as Mustang Dan."

"The last challenged Monte Joe to fight for the prisoner, but as it was my game I took the fight upon myself."

"I didn't wish to kill Mustang Dan, so split his hand open with a bullet and he went off in search of a doctor."

"Then Monte Joe helped me to get my man to the hotel, and when I came out at dawn to leave, I found he had nobly stood guard for me with other pards, for the men of Tiger Tom's kind meant to rescue him."

"A good fellow indeed, this Monte Joe."

"Yes, sir, I can count on him every time."

"But I started with my man, and you shall hear just how cleverly I was taken in," and Buck told the story of the rescue by the two supposed Indians, how he had gone back on their trail, reopened the three graves, and finding one man alive, had carried him to Soldier's Retreat Ranch and left him in the care of Captain Hassan."

"I knew Surgeon Hassan well, Taylor, and you could not have a truer friend than he."

"I remember when he was married and what a beautiful woman his Mexican wife was."

"Is her daughter like her?"

"Yes, sir, only more so."

"More how, Taylor?"

"Well, sir, more beautiful."

"I understand; but to your story, please."

Then Buck told of his going to the ranch of Tiger Tom.

"You are a bold man to make such a desperate venture as that, Taylor."

"You are too reckless."

"Well, sir, I counted upon a fight, or a foot-race, if I found the Tiger in his den; but instead I was welcomed by that lovely wife of his, and I was treated most kindly."

"When I left the next morning she just had my haversack loaded with provisions, and very glad I was of it afterward."

The story of the ambush at Red Rock Spring, and capture of Tiger Tom, and all that followed, Buck Taylor also made known to the colonel, who became more and more interested in his strange narrative, and said:

"You have had a remarkable series of adventures, Taylor, and I confess I am at a loss to solve that problem, the wife of Tiger Tom."

"That she was your friend her actions proved decisively, while her husband is certainly your worst foe, and a man of all men to be dreaded."

"The woman must be in ignorance of what her husband really is, and yet she may love him knowing all and cling to him in spite of his evil life, for I have known of such cases."

"What you tell me about this sign, which you refer to as a brand in the palm of the left hand, certainly indicates a secret league for some purpose."

"You could not discover if it was in the woman's hand?"

"No sir, nor in the hands of the cowboys at

the ranch of Tiger Tom, while he kept his palm well shielded from my view."

"It would be well to mark all men who wear such a brand, and find out just what their antecedents are."

"That is what I wish to do, sir, and I am resolved to track this Branded Band down, and I look for aid in the man now lying wounded at Captain Hassan's ranch."

"If he will betray his comrades then I can work to good effect, sir."

"Yes, but first get thoroughly well, and start out again upon your work," said the colonel, and telling Buck to visit him in a day or two again he sent him at once to report to the post surgeon.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE LASSO LEAGUE RANGERS.

WHEN Buck Taylor reported to Surgeon Dent, that officer gave him a very critical examination.

"Well, Taylor, I can only say that you are about the only man who could have gone through what you have and lived."

"This bullet glanced on the bone, which was hard enough to turn it, and the wound is healing well."

"Your leg is badly bruised and lacerated, as is also your arm, and why both were not broken you have to thank yourself for having the strongest bones I ever saw."

"You are generally bruised up, and yet are doing splendidly in spite of your long ride and exertions."

"But you must be kept quiet for a week or more, and be put regularly under treatment, and you will come out ready for another bout with a foe."

"I suppose there is nothing left of your enemy?"

"Oh, yes, Surgeon Dent, he is all left, for I got the worst of it."

"Did one man use you up this way, Buck?"

"Well, sir, a couple of bullets, the fall of my dead horse upon me, and the tumble in about a second of time was what rounded me up in this shape, Surgeon Dent," was the laughing reply of the cowboy chief.

As he had to keep to his quarters, under peremptory orders of the surgeon, who threatened him with Colonel Miles if he did not, Buck was determined not to be idle.

So he planned his future movements the while.

"I must make no mistake this time, but be sure," he mused, as he lay upon his cot wrapped up in bandages wet with arnica, just one week after his injuries were received.

"I will go first to Soldier's Retreat and see how that resurrected pilgrim is, and if I may depend upon him to tell me what he knows."

"If he does, then I will have little more to do than corral the outfit."

"If he does not, I must ferret out the riddle myself, and start at Trail Crossing, for that is the hotbed of the gang."

"I know their brand, and I shall quietly rope in every man whose left hand shows a Texas star and a tiger in its center."

"But I must not be in a hurry, and though Monte Joe will help me, I must have outside aid."

"Well, I've got it in plenty in my Lasso Rangers."

"Now to pick my men, and see how many I will need."

He was silent for a few minutes, and then mused on:

"I will have the Soldier's Retreat outfit to fall back upon, Monte Joe and several of his pards, so I reckon about a dozen of my best men will be enough."

"They will make thirteen with me, and it is said to be an unlucky number; but I'll risk it."

"I'll pick my champion lariat-throwers, and they are my best shots and riders as well, while they'll stand up and die if they get the call to do so."

"They will have to play cattle-hunters, and drift toward Trail Crossing in twos and threes, while a couple of my most innocent faced ones must give a call at Old Mission Ranch and see what they can discover there, for it would be hardly healthy in that locality for me, I take it."

"I will strike for Soldier's Retreat, see the wounded man, post Captain Hassan as to what trail I am on, and have him hold me a dozen men for quick use, if needed."

"Then to Trail Crossing I go as a missionary, to hunt up sinners who wear a brand."

"By Jove, but I'll do it!" he cried, as a sudden thought flashed through his mind.

"Yes, I'll return her horse to her myself on my way to Soldier's Retreat, turning the animal into the stockade gate at night," and the cowboy chief seemed pleased with the daring of the undertaking.

"Yes, it will offset her bringing the horse to my camp," he added.

"Now, the first thing is to get well, and it will take me about two weeks before I am as good as new again."

"But there is no immediate hurry, for Tiger Tom does not intend to run off, not he."

The days passed slowly along to the Saddle King, but he got well even more rapidly than the surgeon had deemed possible, and in little

over a week after his arrival, was dismissed as no longer on the sick-list.

But he wished a few days to brace up, strengthen himself and get back the cunning of his hand in firing and lasso-throwing.

He put the horse he intended to ride through a course of training, too, and a magnificent animal he was, a roan that had not his equal for speed and endurance in the fort's equine outfit.

He had had several interviews with Colonel Miles, and placed before that officer the plan of his ferreting campaign, though he did not speak of going himself to Tiger Tom's ranch, to carry back the horse loaned him by the wife of the ranchero.

Upon this the colonel would have placed a decided negative.

The dozen champion lasso-throwers and dead shots were picked out and given their orders, so they departed in couples and trios.

And at last the Saddle King himself left the fort one night, mounted upon the black horse given him by Mrs. Tracey, and leading his own animal, to spare him all he could for what was ahead of them.

"I have confidence in your success, Taylor," the colonel had said in parting with the daring cowboy chief.

And so the Lasso Rangers were off upon their perilous duty.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

VALERIE'S WILL.

THE strange woman who was the wife of the desperate man Tiger Tom, realized fully the situation of the Saddle King, when she left him in the camp under the cliff.

He had refused to take her horse, which to have him do she would have walked back alone herself to her home.

She knew that he was more seriously hurt than he supposed or would admit, and she was aware that he could never reach the fort on foot.

So back to Old Mission Ranch she went at a canter.

The night had no terrors for her, mounted as she was, and she was a woman who knew how to take care of herself.

It was some time after nightfall when she reached the ranch, and she dismounted at the piazza, while Si Dunn took her horse.

"I shall need him again, though you can change my saddle and bridle to my gray horse, and hitch both at the rack for me," she said.

Si wondered, yet said nothing, and entering the house, she found Doc Barney filing away at Tiger Tom's manacles, while Black Venus was getting supper.

"Well, Valerie?" quickly said Tiger Tom, in an inquiring and anxious way.

"Yes."

"Did you find him?"

"Certainly."

"Dead?"

"No more than you are, Tom."

"Maledictions upon him!"

The woman laughed and said:

"You, Doc, and Si, must practice more with your rifles, for you killed the horse instead of the rider."

"Perhaps you were nervous."

"We was, ma'm; yer see ther cap'n was alongside of him, and we feared we would hit him."

"Always hit what you shoot at, Doc."

"Did you speak to him, Valerie?"

"Yes, Tom, and offered him my horse to go on with."

"Your horse?"

"Yes."

"And you?"

"Would have walked home."

"Valerie, I will not—"

"Doc, stop filing on those manacles, for if the captain is going to get into an ugly humor, I wish him to remain as he is."

Doc promptly obeyed the woman, and Tiger Tom said in a conciliatory tone:

"You know I spoke for your good, Valerie."

"I know best what I should do, Tom."

"But as he would not take my horse, I am going to take it back to his camp, hitch him there quietly, and ride home again."

"But, Valerie—"

"I shall do it, for that man must be placated by me, or he will bring his whole band of Lasso Rangers upon us and destroy us utterly."

"I know what I am about, Tom, and he is no man to trifle with."

"Knowing that I bring him the horse, and aid him, he will not harm the ranch, but go on the war-path for you, as he told me to tell you that it is war to the knife between you now, but only in a square, manly way, for he would do no underhand work against you."

"I will be hard to find, Valerie."

"Certainly, and not finding you he will not harm me, or mine—see?"

"I believe you are right."

"I know I am, Tom, and we have too much at stake right here to have trouble with Buck Taylor's Lasso Rangers."

"We must not let him destroy us, for we have work ahead of us to do, as you well know."

"Yes, and you are right; but let me take the horse to his camp."

"Tom, since when did you change your opinion of me so as to regard me in the light of a fool?"

"My dear Valerie, you are not even the photograph of one; but let Doc, or Si go, for I do not wish you to have this night ride."

"I am no sensitive plant, Tom, but a rough and hardy prairie flower."

"I shall write him a note, giving him the horse, tie it to the stake rope, and make the animal fast to a tree near his camp."

"But I wish my supper first, for I am as hungry as an Indian," and taking a seat at her desk she wrote the note which Buck Taylor received.

Then they had supper and afterward, leaving Doc to continue the work, with Si and Black Venus, of filing off the manacles from the wrists of Tiger Tom, she mounted her gray and with her black in lead, started for the cowboy chief's camp.

That she successfully accomplished her errand, and kept poor Buck up all night expecting an attack, has been seen.

Then at a run she started for the ranch and arrived after midnight to find the filers still at work.

"I am nearly free, Valerie."

"I will give a helping hand now, Tom."

"You were not gone long."

"I did not tarry there or going and coming."

"You left your gray?"

"No, my black, for he was the better horse for the cowboy chief."

"Now let me have the file, Aunt Venus."

She had thrown off her sombrero and belt of arms, and taking the file began work in a way that told well upon the hard steel.

In half an hour she had the manacles in twain, and springing to his feet Tiger Tom drew her toward him while he said:

"God bless you, Valerie."

"Don't ask blessings, Tom, for the Almighty sounds harsh from your lips," she said.

He seemed to wince under the words, but made no bitter reply, for in her presence the man seemed but as potter's clay to be molded by her will.

"Now, Tom, what are you to do in the future?" she asked, when Black Venus, Si and Barney had left them alone, but not until she had tenderly dressed the wounds of the two cowboys.

"I am going to kill that Texan Saddle King," he said, savagely.

"And I say he is not to die."

"Not to die?"

"No, and now I shall give no reason, but I say that the Saddle King is not to die by your hand, or the hands of others, and do you so let it be known."

"Valerie!"

"It is my will."

"Am I to be obeyed?" she said, imperiously.

"Yes," was his low response.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE RETURN OF A LOAN.

THE Saddle King went on his long trail, back into the dangers he knew were before him, with a light heart and high hopes of success.

His "Picked Twelve" had gone, and he knew they were to be depended upon.

His own horse trotted behind, bearing a light load, while he rode the black given him by Valerie Tracey, but which he took as a loan.

He took the same trail back that he had come, and stopped at the camp under the cliff, at the end of the Cave Canyon.

He remained there all day, as he was anxious to reconnoiter the canyon and its vicinity thoroughly on foot.

He could not but draw a comparison between his feelings on his first and second visits to the camp, and muttered in a grim way:

"Now if I could meet Tiger Tom or his cowardly pards we would be evenly matched I guess."

He went on foot, giving his horses a rest, and took in all the advantages and disadvantages of the Cave Canyon, so that he could use the place in the future if need be.

He left the camp before sunset and went on to Red Rock Spring.

"This trail has been an unlucky one for me on two occasions."

"What will it be on this, the third?" he asked, himself.

Filling his canteen with fresh spring water, he lay back out of sight to get a shot at a deer, for he had a little plan of his own to carry out.

"I have heard it said that the most vicious dog never barks at or bites a butcher, who goes to serve fresh meat at a house."

"Well, I'll play visiting butcher in the Old Mission Ranch to-night and see if the saying holds good with five of the ugliest, largest, most savage-looking brutes in the way of dogs it has ever been my misfortune to see."

"Like master like dog it is in this case, but I'll see what effect a lunch of fresh meat will have."

He had not long to wait before a herd of deer came toward the spring.

There was nothing timid about them, and they came up as though it was their custom to get water there without interference from any one.

Singling out a big fat buck, the cowboy chief dropped him with a shot from his revolver while the startled herd bounded away.

He cut off for himself some juicy steaks, broiled them for his supper, and then with some choice bits for the dogs at Tiger Tom's ranch, wrapped in a corn sack, started upon his way.

Arriving within a mile of the ranch he halted and changed the saddle from the black to his roan.

Then he pinned to the stake rope what he had written, and which was as follows:

"I return Mrs. Tracey's horse with many, many thanks for her kindness, and which I may say saved me untold suffering, perhaps my life.

"BUCK TAYLOR,
"The Saddle King."

Having adjusted this note securely to the rope about the neck of the black horse, he said as he held up his hand:

"Now which way is the wind?"

He soon discovered that the gentle breeze blowing was directly toward the ranch.

"That's fortunate for me, for the dogs will scent the fresh meat and not bark at me; at least that is what I am playing big stakes on—yes steaks is good," and he laughed at his own pun, while he added:

"Not so bad that, and Buck steaks too—for the dogs.

"If I had a little poison to season them with—no, no, that would be mean.

"It is not the dogs I wish to harm but Tiger Tom."

He unrolled his fresh and juicy steaks, laid them on the bag across the horn of the saddle, and rode slowly on toward the ranch.

When near the hill he halted again, staked the horses out and went ahead on foot to reconnoiter.

As though satisfied, he left his own horse on the prairie, put muffers he had made upon the four hoofs of the fine black, and springing lightly upon his back rode on, carrying his fresh meat.

As he reached the stockade gate he started and half raised his revolver.

He thought he heard a voice.

He did, but it was a whine from a dog.

They were all there nervously watching for the return of the hunter.

That the hunter was on the trail of human game did not bother them then—he had fresh meat.

Then Buck Taylor showed his great nerve, for he at once dismounted, opened the stockade gate and gave to each dog a large chunk of meat.

And each dog, vicious as Satan, went off to enjoy it.

They knew him as having been a guest at the ranch, and they knew the black horse well.

So into the stockade gate he went, leading the black, and carrying his extra supply of meat in case the dogs should bolt their food and desire more.

"If they want more they must have it, and quick too," he muttered.

He led the horse to the hitching-rack near the door and tied him securely.

Then his bold nature again asserted itself, for he took the muffers off the hoofs, and taking the note from about the rope, walked to the piazza.

There was a bright light within, and he heard voices.

One coming out of the room would have discovered him; but he stooped at the door and pinned the paper upon it.

Then he turned and glided away to be headed off by the dogs, who had eaten the portions given them and were in the same condition as Oliver Twist, crying for more!

CHAPTER XXXIX.

AN ENEMY IN CAMP.

"Oh you shall have it!

"And it's lucky for me I've got the beef," said Buck Taylor as the dogs crowded around him.

"I have always avoided a snake bite, and never would visit a girl whose father kept a dog, so I'll shell out the venison and then bid you good-night!

"Here, Tiger, you are to be helped first," and he threw a piece of meat to the largest of the dogs.

Then naming them to suit himself, he continued:

"Here Tom, take this!

"And Si, here's your share.

"Not so uneasy, Doc, for this is yours, and you, Black Venus shall have the balance.

"Now guard on that until I get well out of the way, and if I come again recall me to your remembrance and don't go back on me."

With this he walked toward the stockade gate, closed it, and was soon going at a trot for his horse.

Mounting the animal he rode away, back on the trail he had come.

By the Red Rock Spring he went, then through the canyon where lay the bones of his poor horse, picked close by wolves, and dismounting as he reached the trail beyond, he put the muffers upon the hoofs of his horse and turned squarely to the right along the ridge.

"Now they'll see that I just brought the horse back and returned to the fort, and they'll trail me to find out," he said.

Until nearly dawn he held on his way and then went into camp for the balance of the night!

In the meanwhile the dog that finished his portion first decided to share with one that still had something left and this resulted in a row.

The others, like human beings, chipped in though it was no business of theirs and the result was a free fight and no mercy for the under dog.

Of course such a pow-wow brought reinforcements in the shape of Si Dunn and Doc Barney, who saw that it was a bona fide dog-fight, and not a stranger prowling around that the canines had treed, and they let into them with sticks, but without avail.

But Black Venus knew just what to do, and did it promptly, for she appeared upon the scene with a kettle of hot water, and that ended the scrimmage then and there, turning the angry growls and snarls into kiwis that were doleful in the extreme.

As the men turned toward the barn again they started, for their eyes fell upon the black horse hitched to the rack.

"Si, see there!"

"Yes, Doc."

"It's the madam's black."

"Yes."

"The same she took to the Saddle King."

"The same."

"What do it mean?"

"Let us tell there cap'n."

They hastened after the victorious Black Venus who had just reached the piazza.

The light of the open door fell across the piazza floor and Black Venus beheld something white lying there.

She stooped to pick it up and found it fast.

"Lordy, Miss Val'rie, come here, chile!"

Mrs. Tracey quickly obeyed, coming out upon the piazza.

"I scattered dem dogs, missy, but I seen dis paper lyin' here and it stuck to de flo'."

Valerie stooped, took hold of the paper and noticed that it was firmly pinned there, just as Si Dunn called out:

"The black horse is here, ma'm, tied to the rack."

With a bound Valerie was off the piazza, and hastily ran to where the horse stood.

"Yes, it is my horse! it is Blackbird."

"What does it mean?"

"Ah! this will explain, and those dogs were not fighting, but after some one."

She hastened to the cabin and entered the room, the others following.

Tiger Tom was there, seated in an easy-chair, and smoking.

"Tom, my black horse has been sent back, and this letter was pinned to the floor of the piazza."

"My God!"

"Do not be alarmed, for there appears to be no one around now."

"Listen to this."

She read the lines that Buck Taylor had written, and then all gazed at each other.

The woman was the first to speak, and said:

"Well, it seems that the Saddle King can come when he will."

"He has been here?" excitedly said Tiger Tom.

"Is not this note pinned to the floor of the piazza sufficient proof?"

"It is."

"If more is wanted, my horse is yonder at the rack."

"And those dogs?"

"Seemed to have fought each other rather than the Saddle King."

"And we have placed such dependence on them."

"I think I understand it, Tom."

"Well?"

"They knew my horse, and were aware that the Saddle King stayed here all night, and so they did not give voice at his approach."

"Then they are not safe guards."

"Yes, I think so with any one else."

"But what set them to fighting?"

"Perhaps he threw them something to eat."

"Well, we must go out and reconnoiter."

"You come with me, Barney, and Si, put the black horse in the corral."

"At dawn we must take his trail and know which way he came, and where he went."

"Also we must know if he was alone."

"If it comes to this, that a man can come to the ranch at night, then one of us must stand guard at night, that is certain."

"Wait, Tom, and see what the morrow will reveal," said the woman.

A short scout was made, but nothing more was discovered, and the dogs looked ashamed of themselves, for they readily saw that something was wrong.

When bade go take the trail, they ran around from the stockade gate up to the horserack, then to the piazza, and back to the stockade gate.

"Rope one of them and let us see where he will go," added Tiger Tom.

This was done and he led them to the spot on the prairie where Buck Taylor had left his horse.

Here the trail was lost, and Doc Barney said, "Here's where he left his horse, and as the dog is on his trail he don't take any other."

"Well, to-morrow we will know just where he went, and if that cowboy Satan was alone or not," said Tiger Tom, savagely.

And at dawn the three took up the trail and followed it to where it entered Cave Canyon.

"No need to go further, and there may be an ambush there."

"He has gone back to the fort," and to the relief of the two cowboys Tiger Tom turned the head of his horse back toward home, and Valerie was told the result of the trailing, and remarked:

"A man without fear is that Saddle King, Tom."

"Look out when you meet him again."

And Tiger Tom made no reply, but his thoughts were hazy.

CHAPTER XL.

A CAMP IN A CANYON.

BUCK TAYLOR seemed in no hurry to break camp in the morning, for the sun was far above the horizon before he turned out of his blankets.

His horse had cropped all the grass within the radius of his stake-rope, and was glad to be placed in a fresh pasture.

Then the cowboy chief leisurely got his breakfast, and afterward mounted and rode on his way.

He knew that the trail he had taken to Soldier's Retreat was a longer one, but if he had thrown Tiger Tom and his men off his track, believing he had gone back to the fort, he was satisfied.

He was well pleased with having returned the horse to Valerie Tracey, and chuckled over the surprise and fury of Tiger Tom when he knew he had been so close to him.

He halted again before sunset, this time camping upon a ridge that overhung a deep and wild canyon.

He was careful not to light any fire now for he was in a place where Comanches might be prowling, and he had no desire to run upon a hunting party.

His horse awakened him in the night by a low whinny.

It was a warning of danger he well knew, and he watched and waited, rifle in hand.

He was near a trail that would lead him down the ridge to the prairie, and it stretched away for miles, almost unbroken toward the ranch of Soldier's Retreat.

Soon to his acute hearing came a muffled sound, and as it grew louder he muttered:

"Indians on the march."

"Now, where are they going?"

He waited, and soon the fall of hoofs became distinctly audible, and the sound wound into the canyon below him several hundred feet.

Then the sound ceased, and he knew that a halt had been made.

"They are going into camp, and if they build fires I'll have a chance to see their force."

"But fires or no fires, I must know, for this looks like a raid upon Soldier's Retreat."

Soon came the flash of a light, then a glimmer and a red flame appeared down the canyon.

This was followed by another, and another, until five fires were visible, some fifty feet apart.

And around each fire gathered a number of warriors.

"I must get better acquainted," said the cowboy chief, and gliding to his horse he enveloped his head in a blanket so that he would neither move or neigh.

Then he slipped down the canyon sides as far as he dared, and got a good look into the camp.

"Five camp-fires, and a dozen braves around each fire."

"Then there are pickets at either end of the canyon sure."

"That means seventy warriors at least."

"And they have staked their horses out to stay, and are preparing for more than a temporary camp."

"Yes, this canyon is never used now, so they feel safe, and being here proves that they will wait until to-morrow afternoon, then move toward Soldier's Retreat, arriving a couple of hours after dark, when they will make a dash, do their devilish work, and soon after sunrise be back here to the shelter of the hills with their booty, and perhaps have a reserve to beat back pursuit."

"Oh, you cunning red-skins, how glad I am that Tiger Tom's wife gave me that horse, for through returning him I came this way just in time to hit upon your little game."

"Now I'll ride for Soldier's Retreat, and as these fellows will cross the river at the Emigrants' Ford, I will be there with a few friends to welcome them."

He glided back to his horse, muzzled his nose

with his scarf as best he could, muffled his hoofs and led him down the trail crossing the ridge.

Reaching the prairie he mounted, and made a detour to the right, until he had left the range a mile behind him, when he urged his horse into a gallop with the remark:

"You must do your level best now, old fellow."

The good roan did do his level best, for he did not slacken his speed for several hours.

Then the cowboy chief came to the banks of a deep and swiftly-flowing stream.

Following the right bank for several miles he came to the only ford on the river for a long distance.

It was known as Emigrants' Ford, and here he knew the Comanches would cross, but not wish to reach there until after nightfall.

From there to Soldier's Retreat Ranch was about twenty miles.

A halt was made for rest, and then again Buck Taylor pressed on.

He wished to reach the camps of the ranch cowboys before dawn.

This he did an hour before daybreak, and his call soon aroused the gallant band that Captain Ned Hassan was so proud of.

"It's Buck Taylor, the cowboy captain!" cried one.

"Yes, pard, and I want every man of you that can be spared, and you are needed for hot work."

"Leave some one to go to the ranch about breakfast and tell Captain Hassan I came after you, and to be on guard with all his remaining force against a dash in of Comanches, should we miss them."

"Do you understand, boys? It is Comanche this time."

"We are with you, Cap'n Buck," said the one in charge.

"How many can you muster, Charlie?"

"Twenty-four of us, and you are as good as five more."

"I must leave half a dozen men behind, at least."

"All right, Charlie, we will be enough, for there are not over sixty or seventy red-skins, and we'll get in a surprise on them."

"But we must get away at once."

"In three minutes, Cap'n Buck," was the answer.

And within a quarter of an hour twenty-four brave cowboys were following Buck Taylor's lead across the prairie.

They rode rapidly to get well out of sight before dawn should reveal them to any one at the ranch, and just an hour after sunrise they came to Emigrants' Ford.

"What a place for an ambush, Cap'n Buck," said Cowboy Charlie with admiration, as he gazed upon the ravines along the river-bank, and in which a hundred horsemen could lie hidden, while it commanded the ford.

"The water is breast deep, boys, and we'll let the leaders of them get to this shore before we fire."

"Then Injun feathers will fly, and when they turn for their village, our horses will be fresh and we can push them to death," said Buck Taylor.

And having placed his men, all waited patiently for the coming of night and the Comanches.

CHAPTER XLI.

AT THE EMIGRANTS' FORD.

THE horses of the cowboys were allowed to feed until late in the afternoon, for there was plenty of grass along the river-banks, and the thick growth of timber protected them from view.

The ford had not been used for years, and for the Comanches to cross by any other would give them a ride of twenty miles further to make their dash, while they could retreat by way of the Emigrants' Ford.

But Buck Taylor had taken two men from his force, sending one to each of the other fords, to ride back to them with all speed and report if the Comanches should appear at either of them.

Then the cowboys would have a ride little short of what the Indians would have to make, to reach Soldier's Retreat, and besides would have to meet them in the open prairie; but in case they came from either of the other fords they could save the ranch and the cattle they felt sure.

The fact that the Comanches had gone into camp in the canyon, where he had seen them, convinced Buck Taylor that they intended making a dash by the Emigrants' Ford, and in this all the cowboys agreed with him.

Late in the afternoon the man on watch reported more horsemen coming up the river.

All was at once a scene of activity until the report came that they were white men.

Taking a look at them, to his great delight, the Saddle King recognized his own men.

There were five of them, a party of three and another of two having met that morning on the prairie, on their way to Trail Crossing.

"That gives us twenty-eight men all told," cried Buck, gleefully, and he greeted his men as they crossed the ford and quickly explained the situation.

The cowboys' horses were now brought into the ravine saddled and bridled, supper was disposed of and just at dark all were in position to meet the foe.

There was a new moon, only a few nights old, and it gave just light enough to see to use their rifles well.

Half an hour after nightfall the sound of hoofs was heard, coming through the prairie grass across the river, and just as the Saddle King had begun to fear that the Indians had gone to one of the other fords.

Then a dark mass came in sight, moving slowly on and halting near the ford.

The moon revealed then two dark forms appear upon the other bank of the river, and the call of a night bird was heard.

They had signaled that all was well at the ford.

Instantly the dark mass came on and soon there were four-score Comanche horsemen in the river.

"More than I supposed," muttered the Saddle King, and he passed the whisper down the line: "All ready!"

A score of red-skin horsemen came out of the river together, and pressing close in the rear were others.

Then the leaders moved along the trail between the ravines, the warriors dropping back to single file.

"Fire!" came in a loud voice from the cowboy captain, and twenty-eight rifles flashed together.

And loud rung the wild yell of Buck Taylor and his Lasso League, and the cowboys of the Hassan Ranch echoed it with their battle-cry.

The effect of the fire was appalling, the yells demoralizing, and the Comanches unhurt, wheeled their ponies in flight.

"Mount, Minute-men, and after them!" commanded Buck Taylor, and with terrific yells the cowboys went in hot chase at once.

The Comanches gave a few yells of fury and defiance, but they knew the war-cry of the Lasso League, and supposed the Saddle King's whole band was upon them.

Others fell beneath the rattle of the revolvers, some were wounded and drowned, some lost their horses, and sought to seek a hiding-place, while the mass retreated at a run, closely huddled together.

Then it became a running fight, blow for blow, but the firearms of the cowboys dealt death most liberally in the red-skin ranks, and braves fled for their lives alone.

At last the panting horses were called to a halt, and the Saddle King said in his grim way:

"The Comanches will remember this night for many a long day."

Then came the order to throw the dead and wounded across the captured ponies, and return to the ford.

It was done, and the tired cowboys went into camp, and did all they could for their wounded comrades, for not an Indian had been found that was not dead.

The dead red-skins were buried on the river-bank, while the two cowboys that were slain were carried with the half-dozen wounded back to Soldier's Retreat.

Ere they reached the ranch the sun rose, and they saw Captain Hassan coming across the prairie at a gallop.

The cowboys greeted him with a cheer, and one of them called out:

"We wiped out half their band, captain."

"And you are the one that has saved us, Buck?"

"Well, you pile up more obligations than I can ever repay."

"But 'God bless you, Buck Taylor!' will be a prayer that will ever go up from our hearthstone for you."

"Oh, I just happened on them by chance, Captain Hassan, when I was on my way here, and I can tell you that I want no better fighters than your boys."

"A good commander makes good soldiers, Captain Buck," a cowboy said.

"Well, boys, you know how I feel toward you all, and I deeply regret to see two poor fellows have been killed, and others wounded."

"Who are the dead, Cassiday?"

"Our camp captain, sir, poor Charlie Sands, and Teddy Moore."

"Poor fellows! but I wish to get the wounded home as soon as possible, so I can look after them."

"Meanwhile, Buck, we will ride on ahead, for I have something of importance to make known to you," and Captain Hassan and the Saddle King went on ahead at a canter.

CHAPTER XLII.

BUCK HEARS NEWS.

"WELL, Buck, I am glad to see you indeed; but tell me how it was you headed off this Comanche raid upon my home, and which would have been more disastrous than words can express, for we were hardly prepared for a visit from the Comanches," said Captain Hassan as he and Buck Taylor rode along together.

"I'll only be able to say what I did before, captain, that it was an accident."

"I camped for the night on Crow's Nest, and my horse awoke me as the Comanches came near."

"They camped in the Echo Canyon, and I knew it could only mean an attack to-night on your ranch, so I rode for your men, got them in position, sent you word to be on the lookout for an attack, and dispatched two boys to the other fords to run up for us, if the red-skins changed their crossing of the river."

"They came just where we wanted them and walked into our trap."

"That is all there is to tell."

"In actual fact, yes; but what has the service not been that you rendered?"

"I got the few men left together, arranged for a fight, and then came on to find you, as I thought all danger over, for I supposed you were on a scout with the men."

"There will be no danger of a raid now for a long time, as they will feel that we are watching them."

"Yes, captain, but you have men enough to keep two of them scouting all the time, and I would do so if I were in your place."

"A good idea, Buck, and I will act upon it; but where were you going when you found the Comanches in Echo Canyon?"

"On my way to Soldier's Retreat, sir."

"I am glad of that; but why were you on that trail?"

"I'll give you the story, sir, that took me so far out of my way," and Buck Taylor made known his adventures in full since leaving Soldier's Retreat, with Belle Hassan his fair escort to the Sunset Range, as the young girl had called the ridge where she had often enjoyed seeing the glorious sunset scenes.

"Well, Buck, I congratulate you upon your escape from death, for you had indeed a close call."

"But you amaze me in what you say about this mysterious woman at Tiger Tom's ranch, and I will say nothing about her of course, as no one seems to know of her presence there, and you think it had best be kept a secret."

"I think I can act better, sir, with no one knowing that a woman is there, and, as I said, I am on the war-path after Tiger Tom to run him down or go under myself."

"He is a remarkable man and his master Satan seems to hold him in his keeping."

"It would seem, sir, that he wears a charmed life; but our third meeting may be less pleasant for him."

"I hope so, at least; but now I have a story to tell you, Buck."

"Well, sir, I am ready to listen."

"Did you see any signs of an enemy lurking near where you parted with Belle upon the Sunset Ridge?"

"No indeed, sir, not a trace."

"Has harm befallen her?" anxiously asked the cowboy chief.

"If there had you would have been the first man I sent for, Buck."

"Thank you, sir."

"She was captured, I admit, and not half an hour after you left her."

"Captured, sir?"

"Yes."

"But by whom?"

"A rough-looking individual calling himself Tanglefoot, and not an inappropriate name for him by any means."

"Pray let me know all the particulars, Captain Hassan."

The captain told the whole story, of Belle's capture and then her turning the tables upon her captor so cleverly.

Buck laughed heartily, but there was a dangerous light in his eyes as he said:

"I must know that man better."

"The question is finding him to keep up the acquaintance, Buck."

"Has he escaped, sir?" quickly asked the cowboy, and with considerable anxiety.

"Yes, he has."

"Better had it been to have the cowboys hang him, as you said they came near doing."

"True, but that Belle would not listen to for an instant, as I told you, and so saved him."

"And you kept him a prisoner how long, sir?"

"That is what I wish to tell you, Buck."

Buck Taylor seemed really distressed to know about the escape of the man who had made such a bold attack upon Belle Hassan, and waited to hear all there was to the story of his escape.

So the captain told the story.

"I took the man home, and put him under charge of two of my pards."

He was ironed, and the next day I carried him over to the office where I had the wounded man whom you brought in."

"I had really forgotten to ask you how he was, sir?"

"You shall know presently."

"I wished to see if the prisoner Belle captured knew aught of the other one."

"A good idea."

"You know that the one having been supposed to be killed, and buried, the other man, if with the party, would surely betray himself when they met face to face."

"Yes, sir, sure."

"I led Buck's prisoner into the room without

a word, and the fellow staggered back appalled."

"He knew him, then?"

"Yes, and what was more, I made an excuse to feel the man's pulse, and upon the palm of his left hand was your Star and Tiger brand, Buck."

"That meant that he belonged to the same band."

"It could mean nothing else."

CHAPTER XLIII.

"LADY JIM."

FOR some minutes the captain and the cowboy chief rode on in silence, both busy with their thoughts, and the former was the first to speak.

"I am sorry the man escaped, Buck, but I'll explain the whole matter and you will see just how I was taken in."

"I do not blame you, Captain Hassan, but I am only sorry that the fellow got away, as he will have to be run down again."

"When I took him into the room of the wounded man, and he showed such horror at beholding him, I knew that they were friends, or at least belonged to the same band, be it proved for what it may."

"His brand in the hand had told this much, and his terror at beholding the wounded man there proved conclusively that he had been with the party who buried him."

"That was conclusive evidence; but he also admitted as much."

"Indeed, sir?"

"Yes, he said that the man was a pard of his, who had been killed a short while before in a fight with the Indians."

"Ah!"

"And had been buried at night by his comrades, with several others also slain by the Comanches."

"I am a Comanche then, and yet I thought I was fighting Comanches," said Buck, with a smile.

"That was his story, and then I asked him more about the man."

"Would he tell you anything?"

"Yes, he said his name was Lady Jim."

"Lady Jim?"

"Yes."

"I heard of him in Trail Crossing."

"What did you hear?"

"That he was a young man, very effeminate-looking and dangerous to arouse."

"You did not see him?"

"No, sir."

"Then the man is Lady Jim."

"He must be, as Tanglefoot the Tough, as he was pleased to call himself, told me he was."

"There can be no doubt of it, sir."

"I asked the fellow to tell me about the wounded man, and his answer was that he had come to Trail Crossing a year before, was a quiet sort of fellow, but when set upon once by some desperadoes had shown himself a very dangerous man, for he had killed two of them and made the third leave the settlement."

"Did he say what his business was, if he had any?"

"He said he was a cowboy-gambler."

"That is what I heard, sir, of him."

"Then he told me that his pleasant manners, and gentle ways, had caused the boys to give him the name of Lady Jim."

"How did he explain that he was shot by Indians, captain?"

"He said that a party of them had gone after cattle and were attacked by Comanches, three of the party having been killed and buried on the Deer Range Hills; but the way they had slain the Comanches, he informed me, was something to be proud of."

"I suppose so, sir," and Buck laughed, while Captain Hassan continued:

"Now to the escape, Buck."

"Yes, sir."

"I left him under the charge of Tonto and his son, in irons, and the peons, though not watching him constantly, to drop in now and then and see that all was right."

"At night one of them was asleep in the office with the prisoner, while Lulu had her cot in the room with Lady Jim."

"And has he improved?"

"He showed improvement physically, but not once did he utter a word, or show a sign that he was conscious of anything around him."

"His brain was affected, then, by the shot?"

"I am really sorry, very sorry, sir, for I feel an interest in him that is most sincere."

"At first I believed him to be of unsound mind from the shock, and I must say I think he really was so when you brought him to the ranch."

"But you changed your mind, sir?"

"I certainly did, and now know that he was playing a part."

"He played well, sir."

"He did act his role to perfection, and just deceived me completely, old Lulu and Tonto."

"I am sorry he gave you so much trouble, sir."

"Not at all, for he was no trouble, and his case I enjoyed, for it was an interesting one, and I have by no means given up my study, or

love of surgery because I have turned ranchero, Buck."

"The only thing is, I hate to confess to you, that both Lady Jim and Tanglefoot the Tough escaped."

"Escaped! so Tanglefoot took Lady Jim with him, sir," and the cowboy chief laughed, for he really enjoyed the look upon the face of Captain Hassan.

"My dear Buck, it was the other way."

"How so, sir?"

"Lady Jim took Tanglefoot the Tough with him."

"Ah! he recovered suddenly then?"

"I'll tell you how it was."

"I dressed Lady Jim's wound about sunset, and found it in splendid condition."

"Old Lulu carried his supper to him, and he ate it with a relish, but did not speak, or even look at her, she said, and he never had done so."

"Tonto went on duty, or rather to his bed in the office, about nine o'clock and Tanglefoot was lying upon his cot and sleeping soundly, he said."

"That is all that either Tonto or Lulu knew, or could state, and the rest is surmise on my part, and I believe about as correct as to what occurred."

"I had, when operating upon Lady Jim, given him chloroform, and the bottle was in my office."

"This he knew, though he had shown us no sign of possessing any reason."

"So he slipped noiselessly out of bed, got the bottle of chloroform, and saturating two towels with it, managed to get both Lulu and Tonto under its influence."

"Tonto had the key of Tanglefoot's irons in his pocket, and so this was found, the man was freed and the two departed together, taking the two best horses in my stables."

"Well, that pair are dandies," was Buck Taylor's comment upon the captain's story.

CHAPTER XLIV.

CAPTAIN HASSAN'S DISCOVERY.

THE captain was very glad to see that Buck Taylor took the escape of the prisoners so lightly, for he had fretted much over the affair, and had done all he could to recapture them.

"Please tell me the whole of the story, captain," said the cowboy chief in his pleasant way.

"Well, Buck, I went to the office in the morning, just as I saw Tonto's son come in a jump out of the office."

"He was so terrified he could only say that his father and Lulu were dead."

"I ran into the office and there lay Tonto sleeping soundly, and Lulu was in the same condition in the other room."

"The two prisoners were gone, and the odor of chloroform about the place told the story."

"I at once went to look upon the two peons, having them placed outdoors, and was glad to see that they were not dead."

"At last they came round all right, but could tell me nothing more than that as usual they had gone to sleep with the prisoners safe and sound."

"The chloroform bottle was nearly empty, and a towel had been saturated with it, and placed over the faces of the peons."

"Upon my desk lay the irons which I had put on Tanglefoot, and beneath them were two notes."

"One was addressed to me in a feminine hand, but a bold one, and it was well written."

"The other bore your name."

"Here they are."

Buck took the two notes while Captain Hassan continued:

"I at once signaled for the cowboys, and finding that two of the best horses had been taken, sent them upon the trail."

"A dozen men started, and they were gone two days, having tracked them to the emigrant trail down toward Trail Crossing, and there the travel had been so great as to destroy all trace, and so came back."

"Read my note first, Buck."

The cowboy chief did so and it was as follows:

"SOLDIER'S RETREAT RANCH,
Midnight."

"MY DEAR CAPTAIN HASSAN:—

"Words cannot express to you the deep gratitude I feel for all your kindness to me, and also the regret I have at having to depart like a thief in the night from your hospitable home and kind care."

"But having been found in bad company, I fear I might suffer for the sins of others, so I take French leave, as the opportunity offers, and knowing that Tanglefoot the Tough, not my friend, as he said, would be hanged, as he deservedly should be, I release him too, hoping to make a useful tool of him by so doing, to serve my ends."

"I leave a note for Buck Taylor, the Saddle King, which kindly hand to him upon his next visit to your home."

"I take the liberty of arming myself from your collection of weapons in the office, and taking a few necessary supplies, along with a horse, all of which I shall return; but what Tanglefoot steals from you, I am not responsible for."

"Again thanking you for your disinterested and kind care of me, believe me,

"Your attached friend,

"LADY JIM."

"P. S. Please say to poor Lulu that I shall not forget her kind care of me, and will prove my appreciation some day in more than words."

"LADY JIM."

"Well!" and Buck Taylor drew a long breath.

"What do you think of it, Buck?"

"I admire that man, sir, immensely."

"So do I; but now see what your note says, for you see that it is sealed."

"He took his time in writing, borrowing your pen, ink, paper and envelopes, along with your horse, sir."

"Yes, and a couple of blankets, a belt of revolvers and a rifle."

"Nothing to eat?"

"Oh yes, they broke into the kitchen and got a supply," said the captain, with a laugh.

"That was Tanglefoot's work, sir, for Lady Jim would never steal."

"No, I guess Tanglefoot did the stealing and Lady Jim the borrowing; but now to your letter, Buck, for I am anxious to know its contents."

Buck Taylor tore open the envelope and read:

"SOLDIER'S RETREAT,
Midnight."

"MY DEAR RESCUER:—

"What can I say to you for thus making my escape from the charge of the kind man into whose skillful and hospitable hands you placed me?"

"But necessity urges me to go, as I have a life work just begun, a work unfulfilled."

"What can I say to you, my noble rescuer, for taking me from a grave where I had been placed as dead, and bringing me back to life?"

"What care I if your hand laid me low, yours the shot that sent me to my grave; did you not fire in defense of your own life, and was I not your foe, in appearance at least?"

"You saved me from death in the grave, and it far more than atones for the wound you gave me."

"Your care brought me to life, you sacrificed yourself to serve me, a foe, and you placed me where I could receive every care and live."

"Now I repay you by slipping away, and turning loose a human tiger who would be only too happy to take your life."

"But it is my destiny, and I follow it blindly."

"Were it not intended that I should escape, the means would not now be placed at my hand as they are."

"I go, but we will meet again, for I am not one to forgive a foe, or forget a friend."

"If ever you receive a communication bearing the brand you saw in my left hand, do not hesitate to obey what it tells you."

"I mean what I say."

"Ever gratefully,

"LADY JIM."

"A remarkable letter that, Buck."

"Yes, sir, a very remarkable letter indeed," was the thoughtful reply of the Saddle King.

CHAPTER XLV.

THE RETURN.

UPON the arrival of the captain and the cowboy, in sight of the ranch, they beheld Mrs. Hassan and Belle upon the piazza waving them a welcome.

"I have another secret to tell you, Buck, but not now, not now."

"It will keep until we have another talk over this matter," said Captain Hassan.

Then they spurred their horses forward and were soon at the house, when Buck sprang from his saddle and met a welcome from Mrs. Hassan and her daughter that made his heart glad.

The captain quickly related the events of the fight with the Comanches, and continued:

"And we have the Saddle King to thank again, Marion."

"Yes, he is ever our kind preserver, and what he has done is far beyond thanks," was the earnest reply.

"Now I must go and prepare the poor boys who are wounded, and order coffins made for the dead."

"I am glad, Buck, that though you and your men were in the thickest of the fight, not one of you were wounded even."

"It's hard to kill a Lariat Ranger, captain; but we were indeed fortunate, yet what was our fortune was the sorrow of your men, for they suffered heavily, and a gallant set they are."

"It might have been far worse, Buck, and that is the way the men look at it; but I must be off, so will leave you with the ladies, and you know where your quarters are."

"I'll soon be over to help you, sir, when the men arrive," and turning to Belle, the cowboy chief continued:

"So, girl pard, you have been making a heroine of yourself, I hear?"

"No; I got into a scrape and extricated myself, that is all; but I'm glad the fellow escaped."

"Glad?"

"Yes, indeed."

"And why, may I ask?"

"Well, if he had remained, I just know he would have been hanged, and then his life would have been on my hands, and I never would have felt the same again."

"But as he has escaped I don't care now if he is recaptured and hanged, for that will not be my fault—see?"

"Yes, I see, Girl Pard, and under the circumstances, I, too, am glad he escaped; but why did you not call me back that day?"

"I had no bugle to call you with."

"It was a plucky thing in you to do, and just like you, to turn the tables on him as you did."

"What else was to be done, and I am not one to submit tamely, Brother Buck, when I can get a chance to show my claws when needed."

"You are right; but what did you think of Lady Jim?"

"I only saw him a few times, taking old Lulu's place as nurse now and then."

"Yet you had an opinion of course."

"A woman without an opinion of a man is a nonentity, Brother Buck."

"And yours of Lady Jim?"

"Well, he had just the face to do what he did."

"He was a very remarkable young man, and I admired his face immensely, while now I am lost in admiration of his wonderful nerve."

"Did your father show you the letter he left for him?"

"Yes, and it was a good one."

"Read mine and see what you think, Girl Pard," and the Saddle King handed over the letter.

"I cannot believe that man is wicked."

"Well, he was caught in bad company."

"True, but circumstances we know not of may have driven him to be there."

"Yes, but he stole your father's blankets, arms and horse."

"No, he borrowed them, and I believe will return them, and I believe you have the same opinion, Brother Buck."

"Yes, I have, I admit it."

"Now see what nerve he had, for I do not believe he was once unconscious after you brought him to at the grave."

"He must have seen and known all, and yet he did not wince, you said, when you dressed his wound, nor did he show his horror at the awful fate he had escaped."

"He played his part most perfectly through all, and not a word did even Lulu hear him utter, not a moan came from his lips, or any sign of his feeling, seeing or understanding."

"Yet he was quick to save himself and the man I captured, when the opportunity offered."

"Yes, viewed as you regard him, Lady Jim was a remarkable man."

"I studied his face too, and every feature was perfect, and certainly he was a very handsome fellow."

"If he was really a good man I believe he had it in him to become a great one."

"But his talents, or his destiny, directed him toward evil rather than good."

"I should like to meet him again, and I hope to do so."

"Would you raise hand against him, Brother Buck?" quickly asked Belle.

"Not I, Girl Pard! no, indeed. I could never fire on him, after having taken him as I did from the grave."

"My heart, my superstition, call it, would never allow me to harm that man, nor would I allow him to be harmed, if I could help it."

"No, I should protect him with my life from those who sought to kill him, I feel very sure."

"Yet I would like to meet him again."

"He says in his letter that you will do so."

"I hope it; but now the boys are coming in with the wounded and dead, and I must go over and lend what aid I can to your father."

"And I am to be called on if I can be of service, too, remember," called out Belle as he descended the steps.

"Yes, your father told me that you were considerable of a surgeon," was the answer of the Saddle King as he walked off toward the captain's office, whither the wounded cowboys were taken.

CHAPTER XLVI.

AT REST.

ONE of the cowboys of the Soldiers' Retreat Band was found to be so seriously wounded that he died soon after the arrival at the office.

The Indians, though surprised completely, had hit back hard, and, greatly outnumbering the cowboys, had shown what they would have done had they gotten into a fight in the open prairie, or been attacked while at their work of destruction.

The dead were buried that afternoon, Captain Hassan reading over them the burial service of the Episcopal Church and making a few appropriate remarks as to the value of the brave fellows who were gone from their midst.

All the force of the ranch were gathered there and at the grave, except the wounded men and old Lulu, who had resumed her duties as nurse.

And then came, in the plaintive voice of Belle Hassan, the singing of the hymn "Nearer my God to Thee," in which her mother's alto soon joined and her father's fine tenor was heard, Buck Taylor singing base, and thus forming a fine quartette.

As the services ended the cowboys still lingered about the grave until suddenly a voice arose singing a well-known prairie song, "The Cowboy's Farewell."

The whole band joined in the chorus, and thus the dead heroes were laid to rest just as the sun sunk from sight beyond the prairies they had loved so well.

Mounting their horses the cowboy band rode

slowly away, one of Buck's men remaining to ask his chief:

"Any new orders, Cap'n Buck?"

"No, Fred, go on as ordered, starting to-morrow morning, and I will soon be in Trail Crossing."

"Of course none of you are to know me if you see me there, unless you get the signal."

"I understand, Cap'n Buck."

"Good-night all," and Fancy Fred, one of Buck Taylor's most daring men, raised his sombrero and rode on after the others, for his party were to be the guests of the Soldier's Retreat cowboys for the night.

"They are a brave lot of fellows, Buck, and because a little wild, the cowboys are terribly maligned by those who do not know them."

"As for myself I wish no truer, better friends, and I don't say so because you are present," said Captain Hassan as the party turned away from the little burying ground upon the bank of the stream and wended their way back to the ranch.

"Yes, Captain Hassan, I know well that a great many wicked men have crept into the ranks of our cowboy bands; but there are plenty of them who are true as steel and honest as they can be."

"We lead a wild life, get hard knocks, rough usage and our lives are in constant peril, and the settling of a difficulty is an appeal to revolver or knife; but after all we are not as black as we are painted."

"So they say of a certain noted personage from regions infernal, brother Buck," said Belle, with a wicked smile.

"And I believe it is true, Girl Pard, that Old Nick is not so black as he is painted, for let a person do a wrong, they lay it upon the devil, and make him accountable for all our sins, instead of ourselves."

"For my part I am a responsible being, responsible to myself and my fellow beings, and if I go wrong I know well enough who is to blame for it."

"The devil of course," archly said Belle.

"No indeed; Buck Taylor, cowboy at large and no one else," was the energetic response.

A shadow seemed to have fallen upon the household of Soldier's Retreat, usually so gay, and that night there was no laughter and music in the sitting room as there was wont to be when Buck Taylor was there.

All seemed impressed by the narrow escape Soldier's Retreat and its inmates had made, there was a gloom in their hearts too for the dead cowboys and sympathy for the wounded ones, and all felt the shadow without and within doors.

Then too, the fact that Buck Taylor was going upon a mission of desperate peril, or one that seemed to be so, had its influence.

"When are you coming back, Brother Buck?" asked Belle.

"I am not certain when, Girl Pard, for I have quite a little work cut out to do before I can return."

"You are anxious to capture Tiger Tom, I believe?"

"Well, I would like to get my grip upon that gentleman, I confess."

"Is he at Trail Crossing?"

"I hope so."

"He has a ranch though?"

"Oh, yes."

"Is he not more readily found there?"

"Well, I do not care to go and look for him there."

Belle looked curious, but said no more, and soon after she and her mother retired, leaving the captain and the Saddle King together.

"Buck, I don't half like this work you are in," said Captain Hassan.

"Now I think, sir, it is just what I should be engaged in."

"This man Tiger Tom is a deserter, a murderer and robber, for such are his offenses in the army, and he has to die if taken."

"Since then he appears as a ranchero, desperado and murderer in the settlements, and naturally feeling that you are after him he will do all in his power to kill you, or put you out of the way through others."

"Yes, sir, I do not doubt that; but I am going in to win this game in *bucketing against the Tiger*," said the cowboy with a light laugh.

"*Bucketing against the Tiger* is good, very good for a pun, Buck, and I believe you would have your little joke if you were dying; but this Tiger Tom, from the discoveries you have made, we have reason to believe is the head of a band of cut-throats, or a member of the band at least."

"I feel sure of it, sir, and yet I had no chance to see if he wore the brand of the Star and the Tiger although I tried hard to do so."

"I'll wager high that he does; but that reminds me to ask you about those at his ranch?"

"There I was foiled too, sir, in both the woman and the cowboys."

"Well, I believe they wear the brand, and if all who aided in the rescue of Tiger Tom from you, when disguised as Comanches, wear it, then it shows how large the band is."

"Yes, sir, there are a goodly number indeed."

"And what have you to meet them with, should you come to a point of capturing Tiger Tom in Trail Crossing, if you find him there?"

"That is just what I wish to make known to you, sir, and I will tell you now," and Buck drew his chair close to that of the ranchero.

CHAPTER XLVII.

OFF ON THE TIGER'S TRAIL.

NOTWITHSTANDING the fact of the signal defeat and flight of the Comanches, Captain Hassan had not neglected to keep on the watch, and two cowboys had been sent to scout up toward the Indian country, to see if other bands were prowling about upon the war-path.

Then too one cowboy had been left at the Emigrants' Ford, where the fight took place, and the other two crossings being guarded by the men whom Buck Taylor had sent there, it was very certain no advance could be made without being seen, and notice given of it in full time to meet it.

The cowboys were Indian-fighters and trailers as well as cattle-men, and no better scouts could be found than the Wild Boys in Buckskin.

Thus guarded Captain Hassan felt no fear, and he was glad to have a talk with the cowboy chief, and learn just what his views were about the trail after the Tigers, as the Star and Tiger branded band men were now referred to by the ranchero.

"I know your nerve, Buck, your skill, cleverness and fighting qualities; but a knife-thrust, or a little bullet, properly placed, will bring to earth a giant, and I wish you to go with caution."

"So tell me if those boys with you are your only dependence in Trail Crossing?"

Buck smiled and said:

"They are just one-third the outfit, captain."

"Good! then you have twelve men?"

"Thirteen, with myself, Captain Hassan."

"It is said to be an unlucky number, Buck."

"I am taking all chances on superstition, captain."

"But I have twelve of the best men in Texas, and I picked them out of my whole band."

"They can throw the lasso as straight as a bullet, outride, outshoot and outfight any other twelve men in the Lone Star State."

"Each of them is said to bear a charmed life, and you should have seen them to-day, for they were in the thickest of it."

"My men told me that they kept together as one man, threw their lariats and yanked redskins out of the saddle, and once swept right through a body of twenty redskins, wheeled and came back."

"So they did, sir, for I saw them do it."

"See here, Buck Taylor, why don't you say that you led them into it?"

"Did I, sir?"

"Yes, you did, for the men told me so."

"My boys tried the same, but admitted that they were outridden by your men, and they spoke of it as really grand to see you fight together as one man."

"I've got twelve of them who can do the same."

"Well, they are not enough, for you do not know who may set upon you in Trail Crossing."

"I've got a friend there in Monte Joe."

"He may be dead by this time."

"I don't think so, sir; but he has several good pardos who would chip in for me."

"Still you want more backing if you had to call upon them."

"This must be no failure, Buck."

"No, sir, and it was what I wished to ask you."

"I was just coming to that, to say that I would go with a dozen of my men."

"I won't take a man, sir, if you go."

"You are here at your happy home, with a loving wife and daughter, and here you must remain."

"No, sir, I do not care for any aid from Soldier's Retreat."

"Well, Buck, I'll stay, so command me for what men you wish."

"I wish only nine, sir, and I would be glad if you would pick them out."

"You know they must not go with me, for that would spoil all; but you have sent to Trail Crossing for stores, and you might send your wagons there with these men as a guard."

"I wish men who will not get on a spree, and it might be that you could find cattle there for them to buy, as I know you are always making purchases of hoofs."

"Yes, and as I need no stores just now, it would be better for them to go to look up cattle to buy, and not be hampered with wagons."

"If they find cattle, well and good, and if not, they will serve their purpose to aid you."

"Yes, sir, that they will."

"But take more."

"No, sir, your place must not be left unprotected, for the Star and Tiger men may make a dash in on you, so keep on your guard constantly, and you might have your men keep the cattle close, and be ready should they be needed, while I may also give a call on you."

"I will take the field myself, Buck, and see that there is the greatest caution shown, watch-

fulness and readiness to act at a moment's notice.

"I note what you say about the Star and Tiger band making a dash on me, should they not be at Trail Crossing, and I am glad you suggested it, for it is just what they might do."

"Our ranch shall be like a military camp before to-morrow night."

"That is well, sir, and I will feel satisfied."

"When do you wish your men?"

"Send them off to-morrow, sir, please, and simply tell them to be on hand should they get a call from me."

"I know them all, so would recognize them when I see them there, though I do not wish them to take any notice of me."

"I understand."

"I must be supposed to be alone in Trail Crossing, and just there will be my strongest hold, for when I need them there will be your nine cowboys, my twelve lasso-throwers, and Monte Joe, and any of his pards who may follow his lead."

"I wish to make a clean sweep of it, Captain Hassan."

"And you will; but when do you start?"

"At dawn, sir; so bid good-by to the ladies for me."

"They will be disappointed not to see you at breakfast, Buck."

"I had better go on, sir, and I will return this way, I hope."

And the next morning at dawn the Saddle King mounted and rode away upon the Tiger's trail.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

MONTE JOE.

MONTE JOE, the gambler, who had so befriended Buck Taylor in need, was a popular man in Trail Crossing.

His hand was ever ready to help those in distress, he would never play cards with a man who was poor, and he never took the last stake of one who played with him and lost.

He dressed well, more like a clergyman than a gambler, for he wore black broadcloth, a white silk tie, a black slouch hat and gloves.

Now and then his belt of arms appeared on the outside of his frock-coat, and his pants were stuck in the tops of his boots, but only when he was going on a ride.

At all other times the weapons were out of sight, and his pants over his boot-tops.

He was a serious-faced man, though not gloomy, never drank, never was heard to utter a deliberate oath, and was often called by the cowboys, on account of his clerical look, Parson Joe.

Monte Joe had been quite anxious about Buck Taylor after his departure from Trail Crossing with his prisoner, Tiger Tom, for he knew that he had a long and dangerous road to travel, while the desperado was no easy man to handle, with his great size and strength.

He had taken a great fancy to the cowboy chief, and for days had asked all coming into the settlement if they had met him and his prisoner.

"I only hope that he got through all right with Tiger Tom, and that the fellow will be hanged; for if not, I shall have to kill him some day, or he will kill me," said Monte Joe to his immediate pards, though he had no intimate friends that were known of, at least to others.

He was polite toward all, friendly with a few, but was not boon comrade with any one in particular.

If Monte Joe had any other name than the one he answered to, no one knew it.

He had registered on the hotel books as Monte Joe, when he first came to Trail Crossing, and his real name was neither known, wanted, or thought of, for among all present in the settlement, baptismal cognomens were at a discount, and sobriquets the style, or nick-names, and many dared not refer to who they really were for reasons best kept to themselves.

A month had passed away since the arrest of Tiger Tom by Buck Taylor, and yet no one had heard either of the Saddle King or the ranchero desperado, or claimed not to have done so.

Monte Joe had gone on in the even tenor of his way, winning three times out of five in all games he played, and thus keeping well ahead of the cards and giving his pocketbook the proper food to fatten on, something, as he was wont to say, "To lay by for a cold day when I get left."

He was playing with a stranger who had come into the settlements the day before, and had won steadily, greatly to the worry of his adversary, who seemed, however, to be well supplied with money.

He was a man with a face far from prepossessing, had a peremptory way of speaking, and had several times most rudely spoken to Monte Joe during the game.

But Monte Joe was as serene as a mill-pond, never got excited, and paid no attention to the angry and overbearing manner of the other.

At last as he raked over a snug sum, the stranger said tersely:

"You are either a card sharp, or the devil is your patron saint, Monte Joe."

"Well, which do you think it is?"

"Take it as you please."

"No, you express yourself, for you must have an opinion."

"Well, I should say you were a card sharp to win as you do," was the response of the stranger.

The hands of the gambler were both upon the table, counting his money, and as the stranger spoke he had dropped his right upon a revolver, though he did not draw it.

Not a muscle of the gambler's face moved, his eyes did not even flash, nor did he change color in the slightest degree, and thus the stranger felt that he would not resent his insult.

"So that is your opinion, eh?" asked Monte Joe in an off-hand way.

"It is."

"Then you do not care to play any more with me?"

"No, not to be cheated."

The money was counted now, and in a roll, and then up went the right hand, a derringer suddenly slipping into it from the sleeve, and Monte Joe's weapon looked squarely in the face of the stranger, while he said in a tone that meant all he uttered:

"Stranger, you will eat your words, and eat them quick."

"Retract, and ask my pardon, or I send my bullet between your eyes!"

The little derringer, with its large muzzle, looked unflinchingly into the eyes of the stranger, and not a foot distant from them.

The hand of the gambler was as firm as a rock, and the pistol was cocked, his finger upon the trigger.

All held their breath, for a movement of the stranger's hand to draw would cause Monte Joe to touch the trigger with more pressure.

The threatened man turned deadly white, and then, with a nervous laugh, he said:

"Well, I am not hungry, Monte Joe, but seeing as you say I must eat my words, I do."

"You retract?"

"I do."

"Then ask my pardon for the insult, and if there is a man here who says that you have not lied in making the charge you have against me, I will never touch another card in Trail Crossing."

"You have unanimously lied, stranger," cried a voice, and in a full chorus followed:

"That's so!"

"Ask my pardon for the insult."

"I do."

"Now do you see that door?"

"Yes."

"Well, go out of it, and if ever you come in here again I will kill you."

"Go!"

The man slunk away, and as he reached the door half-turned; but a roar of voices went up and frightened him, for he bounded out of sight.

But the voices had not been on his account, for just as he reached the door a tall form entered.

"Tiger Tom!" was the name upon a hundred lips.

And Tiger Tom it was who entered the saloon.

CHAPTER XLIX.

THE TIGER UNCHAINED.

NOTHING could have given the crowd in the saloon at Trail Crossing, more thorough surprise than the reappearance of the Tiger of Texas.

There he was, his giant form just inside the doorway, which he had stooped to enter, and his eyes glancing over the crowd as though he expected to have to fight then and there.

The roar of greeting had been misunderstood by the stranger, who had evidently turned for a shot at Monte Joe, and he had sprung through the door with alacrity.

And then Tiger Tom stepped further into the large saloon, while a voice cried:

"Three rousin' cheers pards, for ther unchained Tiger o' Texas!"

Three cheers were given, but they were very weak in the lungs. Perhaps a score of men cheered among the two hundred who were in the saloon.

If Tiger Tom had asked for an expression of his unpopularity he could not but have felt that he had few friends there.

But he had dared to come back and he was the man to play a bold game of bluff.

So dropping into his border dialect way of speaking, he raised his sombrero and said:

"I thanks yer, pards, fer this generous greetin'."

"It brings tears from my heart ter feel I are so welcome among yer all."

"Come and j'ine me in a drink all round."

The cheer that greeted this invitation was rather more unanimous than the others.

They were more "rousin'" for they struck a popular thirst, and fully three-score

of those present agreed "ter take whisky in the 'rn."

Tiger Tom moved toward the long bar, and the crowd of men athirst did likewise.

"How d'ye, Knuckles, glad ter see yer—put it thar!" and Tiger Tom held out his hand to Bartender Knuckles, who thrust his into a glass pan of water and returned the grip.

"Cuss it, Knuckles! yer hand are all wet."

"And you is all dry, so I has no time ter wipe 'em, Tiger Tom."

"Glad ter see yer ag'in, and only hopes yer won't shoot me afore yer leaves."

The drinks were "set up," and then "tossed down," and Tiger Tom paid the score.

Turning toward the crowd who had not accepted his invitation he seemed a trifle nervous, as he glanced over the room.

Then his eyes fell upon Monte Joe, and the latter called out, from his seat at the table in the corner, where he had played his games with the stranger:

"Hello, Tiger Tom, how did you escape the gallows?"

"I don't understand yer, Monte Joe."

"Well, the last time I saw you, Buck Taylor, the Saddle King, had you in irons, intending to take you to the fort to be hanged."

"Ah yes, I hed forgotten it, Monte Joe; but yer see I didn't hang."

"How did you escape?"

"I didn't escape; I wasn't the man wanted."

"Is that so? Well, you were in luck."

"Do you wish to try a game?"

"Yes, I'll play yer," and Tiger Tom seemed glad to get a chance to sit down away from the general gaze upon him.

"By the way, where is Buck Taylor, Tiger Tom?" asked the gambler, as the man took his seat, a crowd pressing around them.

"I haven't seen him since we parted at ther fort."

"Good friends, of course?"

"Waal, he were sorry he had made a misfit in my case."

"Then you are not for sale?"

"How does yer mean, Monte Joe?"

"I thought that you were offered at five thousand dollars, dead or alive?"

"That were my drunken foolishness, Monte Joe."

"It came pretty near being very serious."

"Yes, too near ter suit me, but what does yer play fer?"

"Name your sum."

"Let's begin on twenty dollars and raise as we pleases."

"I am willing, Tiger Tom, if you are so afraid to name a large sum, and wish to play for chicken feed."

"Who said I was afcerd?"

"I did."

"Waal, call it fifty."

"What is fifty to you or I?"

"Make it a game of interest for both of us, and profit for the one who wins."

"Name yer own stake, then, Monte Joe," was the savage rejoinder of Tiger Tom.

"Well, say one thousand a game."

"I don't mind, fer I hain't ter be bluffed."

"No, Buck Taylor is not here."

"What does yer mean, Monte Joe?"

"He's the only man I ever saw bluff you."

"He can't do it ag'in, and I has money ter bet on it."

"I'll take a side better on that."

"Here, Corkscrew, hold the stakes; here's my thousand that Buck Taylor, the Saddle King, bluffs Tiger Tom the next time they meet, bet off in three months if they do not meet, and money to go to charity if Tiger Tom and myself get killed meanwhile."

Tiger Tom did not relish the gambler's manner or words.

He could not back out from the bet after what he had said, so he took from his pocket a well-filled wallet and counted out ten one hundred-dollar bills.

"They are genuine, are they, Tiger Tom?"

"Does yer think I'd pass counterfeit money, Monte Joe?" firmly demanded Tiger Tom.

"On that question I am an agnostic, Tiger Tom, for I can simply answer, *I don't know.*"

"I merely asked you if they are genuine."

"They is."

"I'll take your word on it."

"Now, Corkscrew, you know the bet, so keep the stakes until won."

"I'll do it, Monte Joe," and the man in charge of the bar counted the money and put it away for safe-keeping.

"Now to our game, Tiger Tom."

The stakes were put up, the game was played through carefully by each man and Tiger Tom lost, and his lack of success was expressed by a bitter oath.

Just then Dead Beat Dick entered the room and whispered something to Tiger Tom.

He rose quickly and said:

"Monte Joe, my horse has got hurt, so I must look to him."

"You is winner ter-night."

With this he hastened from the saloon by the nearest door, one seldom used, while Monte Joe said dryly:

"What a secret to be whispered to him by Dead Beat Dick, that his horse was hurt," and the gambler laughed as though it was a good joke.

CHAPTER L.

AN ASSASSIN FOILED.

THE men in the saloon had wondered not a little at Monte Joe.

He was never known to seek a quarrel, but always to argue for peace, and yet he had seemed almost anxious to force Tiger Tom into a difficulty.

When Tiger Tom had left the saloon Monte Joe lighted a cigar and leaned back in his chair in the corner of the room.

It was a well known fact that the gambler would never play except he had his seat in the corner, and he never allowed a man to get behind him.

He wanted his adversaries, friends and foes, all in front of him.

He twice turned his head and appeared to listen, but went on again with his smoking as though he had enjoyed it.

Having just won some hundreds from the stranger, and followed with a thousand from Tiger Tom he could afford to take it easy for the rest of the evening.

The games went on at the other table, the men talked, laughed, drank and swore, and the clink of glasses kept a merry accompaniment to the other sounds.

Still Monte Joe leaned back in his chair and puffed away at his cigar, an uninterested spectator it seemed of all that was going on.

But suddenly a shot rung out, and instantly a second one, and outside of the saloon.

It came from out of doors, just back of where Monte Joe sat.

The shots were followed by a howl of pain and rage commingled, and the stern command:

"Hold, or I'll aim at your head next time!"

The men near the door moved not, but instantly came loud cries as they fell back into the room, and following them was the tall form of the Saddle King.

As he stepped into the room Buck Taylor had his hand on the shoulder of a man whom he half forced, half dragged with him.

"The Saddle King!"

"The Lasso Demon!"

"Buck Taylor!"

"The Cowboy Chief!" were the yells that greeted him, as the crowd called him by the different names that had been given him.

"Good-evening, pard!" he said pleasantly, and a rousing welcome greeted him.

"Who is this fellow?" he asked, whirling his prisoner around to face the crowd, while all saw that the man's right arm hung useless by his side and the blood was dropping from it.

"The stranger!" came in many voices.

"He's your man, Monte Joe!" Corkscrew called out.

Monte Joe had forced his way forward as he saw who had entered, and grasping the hand of Buck Taylor, said in his pleasant way:

"Awful glad to see you, Saddle King."

"But that's the man I ran out of the saloon awhile ago."

"Where did you catch him?"

"I found him with his revolver pointed through a hole he had just bored with a large auger, and he was aiming at some one seated in the corner."

"As he was an assassin I broke his arm for him with a shot, and it fired his revolver off too."

"Saddle King, I owe you my life, for that man was going to kill me."

"I heard the sound of the auger, but thought it the branches of a tree outside, which the wind was swaying."

"I told you, stranger, that I would kill you if you came in here again; but the Saddle King has branded you, so I'll let that be your punishment."

"We won't!"

The words fell ominously upon the ears of all.

It came from one of the men of the settlement who was well off and had considerable influence.

All eyes were turned upon him at once, and he continued:

"A stand-up fight I can admire, but there has been too much underhand work in this settlement of late, and the lawless men are getting too strong a hold, so as this man was caught in an attempt to assassinate our honored citizen, I say he must take the consequences."

"Men, who are with me?"

A perfect roar greeted his words, and at once the better element saw a chance to declare themselves and make an example of the desperadoes.

"Seize him!" cried the man who was taking the lead, and a dozen hands at once seized the frightened, wounded wretch.

"Gentlemen, you know your business best, but allow me to suggest that as the man is wounded you have his wound looked to and then give him an hour to make himself scarce forever in the settlement," said Buck Taylor.

But the crowd was against him, and Monte Joe said:

"Men, I'll forgive him as the Saddle King has put his mark on him, so let the poor devil go!"

"No!"

"Is he worth a struggle, Monte Joe?" asked Buck Taylor quietly.

"No, we have done all we can, unless we fight for him, and that we must not do."

"No," and Buck Taylor turned to the poor wretch and said:

"I am sorry for you, but you brought it upon yourself."

The man fairly shrieked for mercy, but the men who were going to regulate matters were aroused and the loan of the Saddle King's lariat was requested for the hangman's rope.

"Pardon me if I refuse, gentlemen; I never lend my weapons," was the reply, and many recalled what a dangerous weapon indeed was the lariat in the hand of the Lasso Demon.

And so the stranger was dragged off to his doom, four-fifths of the crowd leaving the saloon to see him hanged.

CHAPTER LI.

TWO STORIES.

THE maddened crowd did not have to go far to find a gallows.

A tree that had served its apprenticeship most thoroughly for just such work, was conveniently near the saloon, and it was a moonlight night.

They did temper justice with mercy by going by the corner of the saloon to take a look at the hole bored in the planking, and they discovered there a gimlet and the auger used.

The gimlet had made an eye-hole to direct future operations through.

Then there was on the ground also the revolver of the assassin, one chamber empty.

What better proof did they need than that.

That settled the case completely in the mind of any doubting Thomas, as to whether the man was or was not guilty.

There were a few tender-hearted men among the crowd who suggested that they should wait until the man recovered from his wound, and a man who had given up preaching for horse-stealing, but was known to be following his last-named profession, made bold to remark that the delay for the wounded arm to heal would give him, the guilty man, a chance to wrestle in prayer for forgiveness for his manifold sins and wickedness.

The suggestor was told so energetically and promptly to go to Torrid Zone, that he was convinced that he had at least best keep

quiet, even if he did not start on the journey to which he had been consigned.

Then a few argued that if he was hanged it would put him out of suffering from his wound, which seemed to many quite a sympathetic way of looking at it.

A lasso was not long in being found, and as the crowd had reached the tree, the poor wretch was told to:

"Shout his pray talk lively!"

This he proceeded to do, and as is usual with great scoundrels, died praying for mercy to himself, which he had never shown to others.

Monte Joe meanwhile had taken Buck Taylor over to his table, and the two sat down together, while those who had not gone to the hanging, gathered around to hear what the cowboy chief had to say for himself.

"When did you arrive, Saddle King?" asked Monte Joe.

"Half an hour ago."

"Come alone?"

"Yes."

"Didn't see the Tiger of Texas?"

"No, but I saw his pard, Dead Beat Dick, in the stable when I rode up, and he shot out as though I had come to kill him, and he was not armed."

"What is that you said, Saddle King?" and Corkscrew came over from the bar.

Buck Taylor repeated what he had said, and Corkscrew asked:

"Did you see which way he went?"

"Yes, he kept up his running until he came to the saloon door."

"He did, did he?"

"Yes."

"Seen him since?"

"No," and Buck Taylor seemed surprised at the questioning, so Corkscrew said:

"Wait a minute and I'll explain."

He went behind the bar, but returned in a minute and said:

"Before you came, Saddle King, Monte Joe here bet Tiger Tom a thousand dollars that the next time he met you, you would bluff him."

"Now I am stake-holder, and I saw Dead Beat Dick run in here and whisper something to Tiger Tom."

"The latter changed color as I saw, got up hurriedly from his game with Monte Joe, and with something about Dick's saying his horse was hurt in the stable, they both went out, not by the main door, but by the side one."

"Now, I wish three of you gentlemen to go to the hotel and see if Tiger Tom is registered there, and then to the stable to see if his horse is there."

"If he has gone, then you scared him off, Saddle King, thus bluffing him, and I hand over the stakes to Monte Joe."

"Is that fair, pards?"

The crowd thus appealed to assented in the affirmative most vigorously, and then three men were selected to go on the errand specified, and they departed at once.

Monte Joe had said nothing, seemingly wholly uninterested in the affair.

But now he asked:

"Did the trial show that Tiger Tom was not the man you thought him, Saddle King?"

"There was no trial."

"No trial?"

"No, for the man escaped from me, and hence I never got him to the fort."

A laugh greeted these words, and Monte Joe told what Tiger Tom had reported.

"I can only say that he told you a deliberate lie."

"The fellow escaped from me, when we were attacked by—by Indians."

"I was wounded and laid up, and when I was able I concluded to come back to Trail Crossing and settle up some unfinished business that brought me here before."

"That is all there is about it."

Again the crowd laughed at Tiger Tom's expense, while Monte Joe said dryly:

"I guess you've finished the business, for my opinion is that Tiger Tom has skipped."

CHAPTER LII.

HANDS OVER.

THE crowd that had gone out to do justice to an outraged community, by hanging the man who had attempted to assassinate Monte Joe, soon began to reassemble in the saloon.

They came in singly, in couples and by squads, and they were surprised to know that Monte Joe, Buck Taylor and some fifty others had not gone out to see the misery of the poor doomed wretch.

"It is done, Monte Joe, and you is avenged," cried one.

"My friend, the Saddle King, avenged me, and I asked no more.

"You wanted a hanging, so it was your picnic not mine," was the answer.

"The judge and jury decided he should hang until to-morrow," cried another who had been a looker-on at the hanging.

"The judge and the jury?" contemptuously said Monte Joe.

"The only judge I acknowledge in this lawless place is myself, and here are the twelve jurymen, stanch and true," and he whipped out his two six-shooters.

There were many in the crowd who did not like the *jurymen*, and so shrunk back; but with a bitter laugh Monte Joe replaced his weapons, while a man who stood near him said:

"Well, I am one to keep up the good work of thinning out the desperadoes here, for there are a number of strangers coming into the settlement the past week, and the hanging to-night will do a world of good, I'm thinking."

"Then organize a regular court and try men, and have officers to carry out your laws when made," Monte Joe said.

This seemed to chime in with the humor of the crowd, but no more was said upon the subject, as the three men sent to the hotel and stables, to ask about Tiger Tom, came back to make their report.

"Well, pards, what is your report?" asked Corkscrew.

"Tiger Tom went to the hotel an hour ago and put up there.

"He had first been to the stable and put up his horse, and he left Dead Beat Dick there to attend to something for him, no one knows what.

"Then the Saddle King arrived and Dead Beat Dick skipped.

"When the Saddle King left the stable Tiger Tom came in and ordered his horse saddled at once, and Dead Beat Dick came out of the hotel with his traps which had been taken there.

"Then Tiger Tom had a few words in a low tone, told the stableman that he had to leave unexpectedly, and rode away."

Such was the report made by the three men through the one they chose as spokesman, and Corkscrew asked:

"Pards, is not that a perfect bluff?"

The affirmative answer was very decisive, and Corkscrew continued:

"Monte Joe, I consider that you won the bet, that the coming of the Saddle King alone ran Tiger Tom out of the settlement of Trail Crossing, so I turn over to you the stakes."

With this Corkscrew handed over the money to Monte Joe, his act being greeted with a ringing cheer of approval, and the gambler said:

"Gentlemen, all of you, order your drinks, and excuse me, as I never touch liquor."

The drinks were poured down with a relish, and the health of Monte Joe was drank with a will.

Then Monte Joe and the Saddle King left the saloon together and went to the stables near by and in the rear of the hotel and saloon.

"Peter, has Tiger Tom left town?" the gambler asked of the stableman.

"Well, sah, he rode away from here wid all his traps, sah, as though he were goin' on a jorney."

"He had not long been in?"

"No, sah; and he done tole me when he come dat he were gwine ter spen' more time in Trail Crossin', an' ter take good keer o' his horse fer him."

"I see; but he left suddenly."

"Yas, sah."

"He gave no reason?"

"No more, sah, den dat he had news dat made him go ruther sudden."

The gambler slipped a piece of gold into the hand of the negro, and said:

"Lend me your lantern, please, Pete, for a moment, as I wish to see if that fellow they hanged is dead."

"Surt'inly, boss, and t'ankee, sah, fer de recemmembrance."

Monte Joe took the lantern, and with Buck Taylor walked toward the tree where the crowd had hanged the man who had attempted his life.

He took hold of his left hand, which was bound to the wounded right behind his back, and, laying his fingers upon the pulse, said:

"He is dead; yes.

"Those executioners never make any mistake in their work."

"Hold the lantern close to the hand, please," said Buck Taylor.

The gambler did so, and opening the stiffening hand, the Saddle King glanced closely at it.

"Yes, he, too, is one," he muttered.

"One what?"

"Look at the palm of his left hand."

"Yes."

"What do you see?"

"A star pricked in india ink, and—yes, a tiger in the center."

"That is it."

"What?"

"When we reach your room I will tell you," was Buck Taylor's reply.

Returning the lantern to Pete, the latter asked:

"Is he dead, boss?"

"Yes, Peter."

"Lordy! an' I sleeps out here o' nights.

"I tell yer, I don't like dis killin' folks round me, boss."

"It isn't pleasant, Peter; but I guess the ghosts won't trouble you."

"I won't stay here, boss, ter give 'em a chance, for I is too near dat tree yonder," and Peter hastily locked his stable and made for the hotel.

CHAPTER LIII.

MONTE JOE'S ROMANCE.

THE two friends, for such had now become Monte Joe and Buck Taylor, went to the latter's room in the hotel, after leaving the stables.

The moment they had crossed the threshold of the room door, Monte Joe turned and held out his hand to the Saddle King, while he said with a voice full of feeling:

"Taylor, let me thank you for the services you rendered me to-night, for but for you I would now have been a dead man."

"Do not speak of it, for I simply saw the fellow planning to assassinate some one, and judged it must be you, as I heard you say that you always stuck to that corner.

"Fortunately I fired in time."

"But I must tell you that you have my unbounded gratitude.

"I am not a man to love life for its joys, to dread death either.

"But I do not care to die yet, for I have a certain duty to perform.

"To be frank with you, I was always a wayward fellow and gave my parents a great many heartaches, I fear, while my two brothers and sister were their joy.

"My father was a very rich man, and I caused him to spend a great deal of money to help me out of scrapes.

"At last I went to sea, for I supposed it would be a good riddance, and when, ten years after, I visited my home, I found that my two good brothers had swamped my father's fortune in his old age, leaving him a beggar.

"One of them had married rich and gave my parents a mere pittance to live upon out of his wife's wealth.

"The other, though with a large salary, gave them nothing.

"A scoundrel had run off with my sister, inveigling her into what proved a mock marriage and then deserted her.

"She appealed to her brothers and they drove her from their doors, so that she went to her parents who gave her shelter, she and her child, although they hardly had food for themselves.

"Thus I found them, and though I came back with little I gave it for their comfort.

"And it made a man of me, for I had squandered their money, thrown away my own.

"My first duty was to my sister, and I wrote a note to the scoundrel, who was living in the town, and soon to marry an heiress.

"He fell into my trap and I had there at my hotel my sister and a clergyman with two witnesses.

"Need I say that there and then he married my sister, and then I threw him out of the room?"

"Two days after he attacked me on the street and I killed him.

"I was arrested, and the rich family of his wife, and the influence of his own people sent me to prison for a long term of years.

"I could not remain in prison, with loved ones depending upon me, so I made my escape and came here.

"I was always lucky with cards, and put my last dollar in a game one night, the first I had ever played for money.

"I left the saloon a winner of thousands.

"I wrote home that I had struck it rich in the mines, bought a comfortable cottage for my parents and sister, and place to their credit every month one half my winnings.

"One-fourth I give to charity, helping those who need, and the other fourth I claim as my own.

"This is a wild life, a perilous one, and those I love know nothing of what I really am.

"Here I am known only as Monte Joe, but I will tell you that my real name is Joseph Hawthorn.

"When I have laid by for my parents and sister enough to support them through life, I will give up gambling and settle down to a quiet life, if I am not snuffed out like a candle before I carry out my good intention.

"Now you know me as I am, Taylor, and in saving my life you have helped those depending upon me, so you have done good service."

Buck Taylor had listened to the gambler's story of his life with considerable interest.

He appreciated his telling him his story, and had always felt that he was a man with a history, one whom it would be safe to trust.

Now he said:

"I thank you, Monte Joe, for your confidence, and it is safe with me."

"Well I know that, Taylor."

"And now I wish to tell you something that will surprise you I think."

"I guess that you are on the war-trail after Tiger Tom."

"You guess aright, for I am."

"It does not surprise me, for this world is not large enough for you two big men to live in, I can see.

"I had an idea that you could never get to the fort with Tiger Tom, and felt sorry afterward that I had not gone with you, taking some of my pards here, with whom I am on good terms, having served them in little ways at different times.

"Now tell me just how it was that Tiger Tom escaped, for I saw that you did not let the whole secret out to-night in the saloon."

"No, and I will tell you now how it was, for I wish you to know."

CHAPTER LIV.

THE "STAR AND THE TIGER."

IN his frank, lucid way, Buck Taylor told the story of his starting to take Tiger Tom to the fort, and the rescue of him by the men pretending to be Comanches.

"See here, Buck, I recall that Dead Beat Dick, and others I knew well, were not to be seen around the day after your departure, and one who was constantly with them I have never seen since."

"Mustang Dan?"

"Oh, no, he is clerk here in the hotel now, only he is not on duty to-night.

"He still wears his arm in a sling, though."

"Who was the man to whom you referred?"

"A man whose fine appearance and quiet ways, along with a very handsome yet womanly face, caused him to be known as Lady Jim."

"Lady Jim?"

"Yes; you know him, then?"

"Yes."

"I often wondered why he went with that rough gang, for he was not of their ilk at all; but he has not been in Trail Crossing for a month."

"I'll tell you why," and then Buck Taylor told the story of his going back on the trail

of the pretended Comanches, and what he had discovered.

Also the finding of Lady Jim, still alive, and what he had done with him.

"And you say he escaped?"

"Yes, with the ruffian Miss Hassan captured, and who called himself Tanglefoot, the Tough."

"What! that fellow?"

"Yes, do you know him?"

"Why, he was in the saloon to-night, and I am surprised you did not recognize him."

"You forget that I never saw him, for he was Miss Hassan's prisoner."

"True! but I'll find out if he is there now."

"And if so, bring him here with you, please, for he wears the brand of the Star and the Tiger in his left palm also."

"Indeed; but I won't be long."

"Fetch him with you, please, for I wish to learn from him all about Lady Jim."

"If he will tell you."

"He shall!" was the decided response.

Monte Joe left the room, and Buck Taylor amused himself glancing about him.

The room was a pleasant one, and the best furnished of any in the hotel.

That the gambler loved his ease was shown by dark blinds to close the daylight out in the mornings, so he could sleep.

There were his slippers, of Persian manufacture, a dressing gown and a Turkish fez for a smoking cap, picked up in his sea service in foreign lands.

A handsome meerschaum pipe was upon the table, a lot of books, a flute, and other evidences of a refined and intelligent occupant of the room.

A repeating rifle hung upon a bracket, a silver-bespangled Mexican saddle and bridle, with a pair of massive spurs hung near the door, with a lasso and belt of arms.

In his room there was not the slightest evidence of the gambler.

In just fifteen minutes Monte Joe was back again.

"Tanglefoot is not there, and I could not find a single one among his regular pards."

"Dead Beat Dick has also gone, and another just took his last trail."

"I heard a couple of shots."

"Yes, one of them ushered his soul into eternity."

"They were not fired in the saloon."

"Oh, no."

"They sounded as though toward the stable, and I thought it might be Peter practicing on ghosts."

"No, I made a ghost."

"You?"

"Yes, the first shot was mine."

"Indeed! and what was the matter, pray?" said Buck Taylor, gazing at the gambler, who was not in the least flurried.

"I took the liberty of finishing up your work."

"Ah! what had I left unfinished?"

"You simply shot Mustang Dan through the hand, instead of through the heart."

"I see, and you have just killed him?"

"I have."

"May I inquire the cause of the quarrel?"

"Oh certainly."

"He is clerk here, you know I told you?"

"Yes."

"Well, he came on duty it seems in bad humor."

"Some one had just brought a note for you."

"For me?"

"Yes, and Mustang Dan took it and said he would hand it to you."

"I had just met the landlord who told me that Mustang Dan had told him he was going to leave Trail Crossing to-night, as he had a better offer elsewhere, and so gave up his position."

"The landlord wanted me to urge him to stay, for he is a good bookkeeper and writes a good hand."

"I was going to do as he asked, when I heard what passed between the man who brought the note for you and Mustang Dan."

"He had at once torn open the envelope, when I told him that the note was for you, not him, and to give it to me as you were in my room."

"His answer was to draw on me, so I killed him."

"Here is the note, and excuse the red stain

on it, as he fell with it in his hand and I had some trouble getting it from his clinched fingers."

Buck Taylor took the note, brushed off the red stain and glanced at the writing.

"It is from Lady Jim!" he cried.

"Indeed! that is strange!"

"I recognized the handwriting at a glance, for I have the letter he wrote me, when he made his escape!"

Then Buck Taylor ran hastily over the letter and said:

"I will read it aloud, Monte Joe."

"If you please, Taylor!"

"I do please," and he went on to read the letter which was as follows:

"TRAIL CROSSING,
Monday Night.

"I told you to heed the warning sign of the Star and Tiger, and you will see that it is at the head of this letter."

"Tiger Tom has gone to his ranch, and those who wear the sign are ordered to follow him with all dispatch, and there are many of them."

"Your presence here drove Tiger Tom away, and he wishes his Tigers about him, hence ordered them to follow, and I go too."

"You know the ranch, and you command the Lasso Rangers' League."

"Need I say more?"

"Again I declare myself,

Your friend,

LADY JIM.

CHAPTER LV.

LADY JIM WRITES AGAIN.

"WELL, Monte Joe, what do you think of this letter?" asked the Saddle King when he had finished reading the letter.

"I think I should believe it."

"I do."

"He admits that he is one of the Star and Tiger band."

"Yes, just what I believed existed."

"With Tiger Tom for its chief?"

"Yes; but I have an idea."

"Well?"

"Why should Mustang Dan wish to read this letter sent to me?"

"Curiosity."

"Yes, but he was Tiger Tom's friend, and I believe he is also one of the band."

"Ah! I had not thought of that."

"I believe it."

"I will soon know."

"Where is his body?"

"In the wash-room I suppose."

"I will go and see."

"No, I will not ask you to do that; but I will go and take a look at his hand to see if the Star and Tiger brand is there."

"Very well, I will wait here."

The Saddle King arose and left the room.

He found quite a crowd in the hotel office discussing the shooting, for the news spread rapidly that Monte Joe had killed Mustang Dan.

The landlord had explained the situation, and no one blamed the gambler.

The body of the dead clerk had been taken into a vacant room and was there for inspection it seemed, for the crowd were filing in and out, and many comments were being made.

Most of them were in admiration of the gambler's shot, for it was in the center of the forehead, for some had even taken measurements to show that it did not vary a hair's breadth from either eyebrow.

Buck Taylor joined in with the crowd and came in for his share of admiration and comment.

He seemed to think the dead man's hands had not been properly crossed, so performed that office to his own satisfaction, and one man remarked upon his kind act and said he was as "tender-hearted as a Texas steer."

If meant as a compliment those who had been most intimately associated with Texas steers did not see just where the compliment came in.

Another remarked that he was getting a closer view of the wound he had given him in the hand to learn just the extent of damage his bullet had done.

At any rate Buck Taylor crossed the hands, the crushed one underneath, and then left the room to the curious who seem fascinated by a look at a dead body.

Entering the gambler's room the latter said:

"Well, Buck?"

"The Star and Tiger Band is there."

"That settles it, and he intended to go with the others."

"Yes, and that is why he wished to read that letter of mine."

"He suspected treachery."

"Without doubt."

Then Monte Joe said:

"Don't think me chicken-hearted, Buck, because I did not seem anxious to go down and look for the brand on Mustang Dan's hand; but the truth is the man I killed on my sister's account was my best pard once."

"Whatever he did to wrong her, I cannot but remember him in boyhood, when we were always together."

"And more, I never see a man shot, I have never seen a duel on the stage, or go witness a funeral, that it does not bring to my mind that death scene of his at my hand."

"Strange as it may seem to you, though I have killed a number of men, every time I draw trigger I see that man's face as it looked the day I shot him."

"When I killed Mustang Dan to-night, it was not his face I saw but that of Bart Bradford's, and it haunts me."

"So it was that I cared not to go down and touch his hand, for I well knew the face of Bart Bradford would appear before me."

"I can understand, Monte Joe, just your feelings, for no matter under what circumstances a man may take a life, he cannot but feel it afterwards and wish to heaven that his had not been the hand to slay it."

"Look at the faces of those men who have been duelists, who have been, for various reasons forced to take life, and I can see there the indelible stamp that marks them."

"Yes, they may not show it to the casual eye, but the feeling is in the heart and brain."

"Ah! who can that be?" and with his revolver in hand Monte Joe said, in answer to a knock at the door:

"Come in, please."

The door opened, and a man with gray hair and slightly bent entered.

"Ah! you are the man who gave the note to Mustang Dan that cost him his life?" said Monte Joe.

"Yes, captain, and I have another for the same gentleman."

"Is he here?"

"Do you seek me?"

"Are you the Saddle King?"

"I am, sir."

"Then this is for you."

"Where did you get it?"

"A young man gave it to me, and paid me to give it to you alone."

"Who gave you the other?"

"The same young man."

"Where is he?"

"He told me there was no answer and rode away upon his horse."

"Good-night."

"Stay, you seem in want, so take this," and Buck Taylor held out a five-dollar bill.

"He paid me, sir, I thank you."

"Well, take this, old gentleman."

"I thank you, sir, I shall treasure it."

He left the room as he spoke, and the Saddle King tore open the envelope.

"It is from Lady Jim."

"So I thought."

"The Star and Tigers heard," read Buck Taylor, aloud, "that you had a number of your Lasso Rangers in Trail Crossing and hence their rapid going."

"They have gone to the ranch of Tiger Tom, and if you follow be prepared to face many."

"How many I will try and let you know."

"Heaven bless Monte Joe for his shot to-night, for it saved the life of

LADY JIM."

"Ah! had Mustang Dan seen the letter, then Lady Jim would have been doomed," said Monte Joe.

"Yes, so your shot was just in time; but how did this secret get out of my men being here?"

"Who can tell? But if you go to Tiger Tom's ranch, I go with you."

"I start to-morrow, and I shall be glad to have you accompany me," was the response of the Saddle King.

CHAPTER LVI.

ON THE TIGER'S TRACK.

UNTIL a late hour Monte Joe, the Gambler, and Buck Taylor sat talking together, and planning for the following of Tiger Tom to his lair.

That Lady Jim had told the truth there

was no doubt, the ranchero, or whatever he might be called, had certainly departed in great haste from the settlement, and that Buck Taylor's coming had been the cause, there was not the slightest doubt.

Then too there was certainly a band of men who were in league for some lawless purpose.

Some one perhaps had turned traitor, and told that the strangers coming into town were the Lasso Demons of Buck Taylor, the Saddle King, a heroic band of cowboys whose deeds were too well known not to have them feared along the whole frontier.

That these men had been dropping into Trail Crossing for a week past, and that Buck Taylor had at last appeared, was proof enough to the lawbreakers that they were the object of their coming.

So Tiger Tom had taken flight promptly, and his men, under some secret law that governed them, had followed as quickly as they could get away, alone, in pairs, or larger numbers, as the case might be.

Mustang Dan's sudden giving up of his clerkship, and his attempt to read a note intended for the Saddle King, showed that he too was one of the band, even had not the brand of the Star and Tiger in his hand have betrayed him after death.

Buck Taylor was very glad of the aid of Monte Joe, for he could not act openly himself, and so gave him the names of the leaders of his men, and those from Soldier's Retreat, asking him to go and see them, and tell them all to drop out of Trail Crossing the next day, and to meet at the Emigrants' Ford, the scene of the fight with the Comanches a short while before.

By going by that trail it would appear that they were on their way to the Fort Si country, and they could follow along the ridge to Cave Canyon, pass through it, and thus get between Tiger Tom's Ranch and the trails for Mexico, a thing which the Saddle King was most anxious to do.

While Monte Joe was gone on his errand, Buck Taylor paced to and fro, as was his wont when in deep thought, and mused half aloud over his plans:

"With Monte Joe to aid me, I can accomplish much, for he is as square a man as I know, and just the one I need for advice and help.

"With my own men, Monte Joe and the Soldier's Retreat cowboys, I will have twenty-two splendid fellows to follow my lead, and I do not care if the outlaws are double that force, for our cause is a just one, and then I have a band that will never say die.

"The boys will watch the trails going out of Trail Crossing, and get at an idea of the number of men who go to aid Tiger Tom, so we will be posted as to how many we are to meet.

"Then, too, that strange fellow, Lady Jim, said in his letter that he would give me more particulars.

"It is true that they may outnumber us, and more, that they have the position upon us; but I happen to know the secret trail from the range, along that rocky ridge that looks like an alligator's back, into the retreat of Tiger Tom.

"Once we get near, and can make a dash at night, all of them can never check us.

"I hate to return to the ranch to fight, on account of that really good and beautiful woman; but it must be done, for she is in very bad company with Tiger Tom and his gang.

"Now, why have they gone to the ranch, unless it is to come out openly as a band of outlaws, when they have been secretly doing lawless acts?"

"That's just it, for believing they are known, they are going to show their true colors.

"Well, if I find they are too many for me, I can call upon Captain Hassan for a dozen more of his brave fellows— Ah! you are back again?" and he turned to Monte Joe, who just then entered the room.

"Yes, and I saw your men."

"Good!"

"They are on the alert, and have noticed the different men on horseback, slipping out of Trail Crossing.

"Some, they say, went with pack-animals, and others had their horses well laden with luggage."

"So they leave you to stay."

"So it seems."

"And my men leave to-morrow."

"Yes, and will make for Emigrants' Ford, as you ordered."

"Well, we will be hot on the track of those fellows, and I do not believe they suspect it."

"No, they evidently think they are giving you the slip.

"But I have something to tell you."

"Yes."

"I saw Lady Jim."

"Ah! to speak to?"

"Yes, I called to him and asked where he had been of late.

"He said he had been laid up for repairs, and was going out of town on a hunt then, for he was mounted."

"Well?"

"He bade me good-by and rode away, and putting this and that together, I believe that it was Lady Jim himself that brought that note, disguised by a false beard and a wig of gray hair, and that old rig he had on."

"I believe you are right.

"Now, how long before you can get away?"

"In just fifteen minutes."

"Then we go together."

Half an hour after the Saddle King and Monte Joe rode off together upon the track of Tiger Tom, the gambler carrying a pack-horse along with his traps, for he was fond of his comfort even when on a deadly trail.

CHAPTER LVII.

CROSSING THE TRAILS.

WITH his men headed for Emigrants' Ford, Buck Taylor was satisfied, and he and Monte Joe left by a trail that would carry them *via* Soldier's Retreat, which would not be more than a score of miles out of their way.

It was the desire of the Saddle King to camp out on the trail to the south, and then, leaving his halting place after dawn to ride across all the trails leading out of Trail Crossing toward the Old Mission Ranch.

He would, he knew, cross some trails not known, perhaps, by Tiger Tom's men, but yet he could draw a pretty close estimate of the number of men who left the settlement during the night, and went by the various trails toward the northwest, having the Old Mission Ranch as their destination.

"You are a cunning one, Buck, on a trail," said Monte Joe admiringly when the two had gone to the southward and camped for the balance of the night.

"You see we can get an idea by crossing the trails," explained Buck.

So they turned in for the night, and at sunrise were up, had breakfast and were soon in the saddle.

Monte Joe was well mounted, and his pack-horse was just as fine an animal as the one he rode.

He had his handsome Mexican saddle and bridle, had donned a corduroy riding-suit, top boots spurs and sombrero, and his rifle hung at his back.

He was thoroughly equipped for the road, a long trail or a fight, and meant to be comfortable withal, for he said laughingly:

"I wish to enjoy life as long as it lasts, Buck, and I love luxury, if I have knocked about the world and roughed it in its worst phases.

"I can put up with less sleep, less to eat and greater hardships than most men I have come in contact with; but at the same time I love luxury and get out of life all there is in it."

"I believe you are right, Monte Joe, and I am a good deal like you, only it has not been my good fortune to see the gilded side of life yet; but see, there go four tracks," and he pointed to a fresh trail which they were crossing.

"Yes, I'll book 'em," and the gambler wrote down the number in a note-book.

"They crossed after the dew fell," said Buck.

A ride of a couple of miles further and one fresh trail was seen, and it showed that the horse was being ridden hard.

"I'll bet that was Tiger Tom," said Monte Joe.

"He was in a hurry, whoever he was."

Monte Joe "booked" that trail too, and they came upon two trails further on.

Then followed a batch of six, another of four, another of three, and scattering ones, until in a ride of twenty miles they had crossed just thirty-three trails, all headed in a way that would lead to Old Mission Ranch, and each one freshly made, not any of them being over twelve hours old.

"Your plan to cross the trails is an excellent one, Buck."

"I think we may say that at least twenty-five of them are Tiger Tom's men; but we must take into consideration that some of them were made by pack-horses, and so do not count for a man in the saddle."

"True, but call his force twenty-five men."

"Then he has a couple I know of at the ranch, and five of the most vicious-looking dogs I ever met with."

"Dogs?"

"Yes."

"Five?"

"Yes."

"They will require five bullets."

"I think I can manage them in another way, if all goes well," and Buck laughed at the remembrance of his last visit to Old Mission Ranch, and told his companion about it, who also enjoyed it.

"But about this woman, Buck?"

"There is just the trouble."

"How so?"

"Well, she treated me so well, came to aid me when she thought I was hurt, brought me her horse, and is really such a beautiful woman that I hate to go and drag her husband out to hang him."

"You are too easily won over by a pretty face, Buck."

"I tell you that there is more Old Nick to the square inch hidden under some sweet faces, than can be found in a whole outfit of Texas cowboys."

"You seem to have had a bad experience, Monte Joe."

"I have had a bitter experience, and yet I love 'em all."

"I tell you, Saddle King, that a woman's composition consists of angel and devil mixed."

"Just start right with her, and you find only the angel, the brimstone never igniting even in a lifetime."

"She is as true as steel as mother, sister, wife, sweetheart, and friend; but just let there be cause to have her show the satanic nature first, and she can be on that tack just as bad, as on the other she was angelic."

"They are not like men, for there is no half-way with a woman."

"She is either good or bad; it is Heaven or Hades with her."

Buck laughed, while he said:

"Well, I have not had the experience you have, Monte Joe, but I believe there is a great deal of truth in what you say."

"Now here we branch off toward Soldier's Retreat, and I will show you two women of the angelic order."

"I hope so, for those are the kind I love to meet, while a bad woman I shun as I would a pestilence," said Monte Joe, feelingly.

CHAPTER LVIII.

THE RENDEZVOUS.

SEATED upon his piazza, enjoying as he always did, the scene around him, as he lazily smoked a cigar, Captain Ned Hassan was surprised to see in one of two horsemen coming toward his home, none other than Buck Taylor.

"Who has he with him, for he is a stranger?"

"And his men, and mine, where are they?" he mused.

Then he called to his wife that Buck Taylor and a friend were coming, just as he saw Belle dashing toward them from over toward the cowboy camps.

"There comes Miss Hassan now," said Buck, as he saw Belle dash out of the shelter of the timber growing along the stream, and come toward them, her horse on a full run.

"How superbly she rides," said Monte Joe.

And as she drew nearer he added:

"What a figure, and what a face."

Buck had told the gambler of his escape from the Comanches with Belle, when she

was a little girl, and that he always regarded Soldier's Retreat as home.

Reining up suddenly Belle wheeled her horse alongside of the cowboy chief's and said in her frank, hearty way, as she extended her small, gloved hand:

"Glad to see you, Brother Buck, and will escort you and your friend to the house."

"My friend, Monte Joe, Miss Hassan," said Buck, introducing the gambler by the name he had said he only wished to have known.

"You are welcome also to Soldier's Retreat, Mr. Monte Joe, and Brother Buck is at home there."

"Where are you from?"

"Trail Crossing last, Girl Pard."

"That horrid place?"

"It is a horrid place, Miss Hassan, and its citizens are even worse, as I know by experience, being one of them," said Monte Joe, with a smile that lighted up his handsome face as Buck Taylor had never seen it beam before.

"Yes, I have heard of you, for you were kind to Brother Buck."

"You are a gambler, I believe?"

"Yes, as my name indicates, Miss Hassan, I am Monte Joe the gambler," was the serene response.

"I never judge a man, Mister Monte Joe, by his calling, but by his acts, and from what I have heard of you, I think we will be good friends," said this sage young maiden of sixteen.

"I hope so, Miss Hassan, for I have also heard much of you from the Saddle King here, and as he has said that I rescued him once, permit me to tell you that he has more than canceled the debt, as he saved me from deliberate assassination two nights ago."

"That's just like him, and I congratulate you and him; but Brother Buck, where are our cowboys you kidnapped from us—not all dead, I hope?"

"Oh, no, they are rendering good service, Girl Pard; but how are the wounded men?"

"Improving, all of them."

"Well, I wish to kidnap your father and half a dozen more of his gallant cowboys."

"If you wish father, then there is going to be a fight, and you need him as surgeon, so you must take me along as nurse, Brother Buck."

"Well, you are a pretty far-sighted little girl," said Buck, and the gambler laughed and said:

"Miss Hassan has had a good teacher in prairie-craft, to hit the truth so well."

"Then there is going to be a fight?"

"We hope so, Girl Pard."

"Then I go."

"No, you stay at home to be Captain Belle, of the cowboy band, in the absence of your father."

"You are worth half a dozen scouts, Girl Pard, and will have to guard the pass."

"I obey orders," was the response, and just then they rode up to the door of the house and Captain Hassan and his wife stood upon the piazza to welcome them.

Monte Joe courteously aided Belle to alight, which she submitted to, he being a stranger, though she usually came down with a leap, and as they ascended the steps together she said:

"Papa, this is Brother Buck's stanch friend, Monte Joe."

"My mother, Mr. Monte Joe."

The welcome that the gambler received told him that there was no nonsense in that household, and he was made to feel at once at home.

After dinner the captain heard from Buck the exact situation, and the latter said:

"Now, Captain Hassan, to go to the fort for aid would take days of time which we dare not risk, and I wish to ask you if you will not go with us as surgeon, carrying along also half a dozen of your men, and leaving Captain Belle to command here in your stead?"

"With pleasure, Buck, and I was going to offer."

"But I can spare even more men if you wish."

"No, sir, for we will have a force of thirty men, and if we can not whip them with those, we can at last hold them in check until I send for the balance of my Lasso League at the fort."

The cowboys needed were sent for, the

captain meanwhile getting together plenty of provisions, his surgical case, lint bandages and all needed for wounded men, and well men as well, he added as he pointed to the provisions.

Horses were packed with what was to be carried, farewells were said and the party started for Emigrants' Ford.

It was nightfall when they arrived, and there they found in camp the other two bands of cowboys, for all had reached the rendezvous.

"We will make a night ride of it to Cave Canyon, and to-morrow we will rest, for at night our work begins," said the Saddle King, and after a short halt the party started on their way, the cowboy chief leading by the trail he had come upon the other side of the ridge, after his return of Valerie's horse to her.

CHAPTER LIX.

THE TIGERS' DEN.

It was true that the unexpected coming of Buck Taylor into Trail Crossing had caused the hasty flight of Tiger Tom.

He had arrived at the settlement to find Dead Beat Dick awaiting him, and to his amazement learned that there were a number of strange horsemen appearing in Trail Crossing the past few days, all of whom appeared to be cattle-buyers.

"Now, it may be all right, cap'n, but I recognizes two of them fellers as belonging ter Buck Taylor's outfit."

"They can't fool me, and yet they pretend not ter know each other, havin' come in seporate."

"But my idee is that they is huntin' humans, and I gives it ter yer fer what it are worth."

"All right, Dick, you keep your eyes open while I go in and win some money and see how ter fellers receives me."

"Yer better let Mustang Dan post ther outfit that we may hev ter light out soon, maybe ter-night, so as ter be ready."

"Whar will yer go, cap'n?"

"Ter my ranch," and Tiger Tom entered the saloon with a result already known.

When Buck Taylor arrived, the hair of Dead Beat Dick nearly raised his sombrero, and he skipped in and posted his chief.

The ranchero lost no time in getting out of the saloon, leaving a heavy loser instead of a winner, and he at once sent Dead Beat Dick to give the password to his men, and tell them to leave that night for Old Mission Ranch.

Tiger Tom went on ahead, and he rode hard.

Horseflesh was nothing to him, so that he reached his ranch in time to prepare for a foe, should the Saddle King follow.

It was in the afternoon of the next day when he arrived, and Valerie saw him coming from her favorite seat upon the piazza.

"What brings him back so soon I wonder," she said aloud, and when he dismounted and turned his tired horse loose to go alone to the stables, she met him with a pleasant greeting.

"Anything gone wrong, Tom?"

"Yes, Valerie, everything."

"Ah! and may I ask what it is?"

"I went to Trail Crossing, and saw at once when I entered the saloon that I was not welcome."

"I invited the crowd to drink, and but a few responded even to that call."

"Monte Joe was there and bantered me to play, and he won a thousand from me in one game."

"He told me that Buck Taylor could bluff me; I bet a thousand on it, not thinking the cowboy was near, and in came Dead Beat Dick to say, the Saddle King had just arrived."

"Then, too, there were dozens of strangers coming into the settlement a week before my arrival, and these proved to be Buck Taylor's Lasso Demons."

"So I had to leave and gave the word for all the men to depart that night as best they could, and come here."

"This looks bad, Tom."

"It is bad."

"The Saddle King will follow you here."

"You believe so?"

"I am sure of it."

"I hope not, but if he does then I may as well meet the alternative."

"A fight?"

"Yes."

"There is a great deal at stake, and if you lose there is no chance to retrieve your fortunes."

"I know it; but if I can crush that Saddle King, then I can still maneuver my men successfully, as in the past."

"What number will be here?"

"Cowboys?"

"I meant Tigers; but what force will the Saddle King have?"

"Anywhere from a dozen to three dozen men."

"And the Tigers all told, now?"

"Thirty-seven with Si and Doc, counting myself, if all come in."

"Well, this is your ranch, you have a large force of cowboys to herd your cattle, and having done no wrong, if attacked, of course you must defend your home, Tom."

"That is the only way to look at it; but there comes in this deserter charge, with murder and robbery."

"You must prove that you are not the man."

"If I can, but I do not believe, if the Saddle King was out of the way, others know of the charge, or would press it."

"He is but a man, Tom."

"Yes, and I wonder if he would meet me in a duel, and thus settle it?"

"Try him, for you never have met your equal, until he crossed your path, and forewarned is forearmed, Tom."

"True, and I'll try it, for he cannot conquer me."

"See, there come some of the men," and a party of horsemen were visible coming over the prairie.

They soon arrived, and from that on they began to come in, from one to five at a time, until by midnight Tiger Tom said grimly:

"I have thirty-six men here now, Valerie, and can defend my home."

"Try the duel first, for if two men can decide it, is it not better?"

"You think so?"

"Having perfect confidence in you, yes, Tom, for before you were taken at disadvantage, and this time it will be man to man on equal terms."

"I will meet him with any weapons he will select—yes, I shall challenge him to face me with lariat against lariat, for I fear no man," was the fierce reply of Tiger Tom.

CHAPTER LX.

A STRANGE COURIER.

THE night ride was made to Cave Canyon, and there the cowboy cavalry went into camp at dawn, throwing out sentinels in each direction, and ambushing them to capture any one who should happen to come by that way.

All day the cowboys and their horses rested, enjoying good food and preparing for the night.

Just at sunset they were ordered to "saddle up," and arriving within a mile of the hill upon which stood the home of Tiger Tom, the party halted.

Then Buck Taylor divided his forces into three companies, one on either side of the ridge that ran back to the range, but a mile distant from it, and the other in front of the ranch.

He had brought fresh meat along, and had attempted to play the same game with the dogs; but the brutes barked so furiously that he knew men were with them and they bayed loudly to warn him not to give them away for their last racket.

So he desisted from the attempt, the horses were staked out, sentinels placed and the men spread their serapes upon the prairie and lay down to sleep until dawn.

All night long the dogs barked fiercely, until by dawn they were as hoarse as a church choir after a donation party to the parson, and could not find further utterance, so left the men to do their share.

Men in the stockade had heard the barking, and wondered, yet, though they were on the watch, camped ready to meet an attack, they had orders not to venture forth, and did not.

When the day dawned they saw that they were surrounded, besieged in fact, and they knew the number too of their foes.

The cowboys on the prairie took it coolly, cooked their breakfast with wood brought for the purpose, rode their horses to water,

at the stream a mile away, and seemed utterly oblivious of the near presence of the ranch of Tiger Tom.

From her piazza Valerie gazed at the cowboys through her glass and counted them.

She saw the Saddle King and two others apart from the rest, at a fire where a peon brought from Soldier's Retreat was cooking breakfast, and she said to her husband:

"Tom, there is the Saddle King; but who are the two with him?"

The ranchero had his glass to his eye and as he turned it upon the little group, said savagely:

One is Monte Joe the gambler."

"And the other?"

"I do not know him, Valerie."

"Well, what is to be done?"

"I shall first send a messenger to them, to ask what they wish."

"Yes?"

"And upon their answer I shall act."

"Send your challenge to the cowboy?"

"Yes, if it is to be a demand for my surrender, I shall tell him that if I am the man he seeks, he must fight to get me; but that my cowboys rest under no charge, and that the *duello* must settle all that is between us."

"Who will you send?"

"Dead Beat Dick, I guess."

But Dead Beat Dick being sent for, begged off, and Tanglefoot the Tough was called for the position of courier.

But he was equally as urgent in his appeal not to go.

"Send that handsome, sad-faced young man you call Lady Jim," said Valerie.

"The very man, for he is intelligent and can understand what he sees."

So Lady Jim was called, and when told to get his horse and go as a courier to the cowboy besiegers of the ranch, he obeyed without a word.

"Your orders, captain?" he said, when ready to depart.

"Say that Ranchero Tracey wishes to know why his home is surrounded in a hostile manner, and who and what are those encamped in threatening force upon his lands," said Valerie, giving Lady Jim his orders, and which Tiger Tom merely acquiesced in.

Lady Jim saluted, sprung into his saddle, and rode out of the stockade gate down the steep trail to the prairie.

All eyes in the ranch were upon him, and out upon the prairie the cowboys at once assumed a position of attention.

He rode forward at a canter when he reached the prairie, taking from his pocket a handkerchief and waving it as a truce.

Instantly the Saddle King waved his white silk handkerchief in response, and the courier moved on at a more rapid pace.

Reaching a spot a hundred yards from the cowboy line, he halted and raised his sombrero.

"Come on! you are safe!" cried Buck Taylor.

But Lady Jim remained as stationary as a statue, and the Saddle King strode forward on foot to meet him.

"You are Lady Jim?" he said, gazing with interest upon the face of the courier.

"Yes, that is what I am called."

"You have recovered your voice I am glad to see," and Buck smiled.

"Yes, and from my wound, also; your wound, for you gave it me."

"I am sorry the necessity demanded it."

"Yes, the necessity demanded victims, and I was one."

"But you saved me from a horrible fate, and you know that I cannot be your foe."

"You have proven that, and I thank you, for I received your letters, in fact you gave me the last one."

"Then you penetrated my disguise?"

"Another did; but why are you here to meet me?"

"I am here on my own account to say that a regiment could not take yonder fort, for it is nothing more, against the force of nearly forty defenders that Tiger Tom has there."

"How about the ridge trail?"

"You would meet certain and sudden death there, for it is a pitfall."

"You are not at heart one of the band."

"At heart, no; but I have a mission to perform, and I have remained with the band to accomplish it."

"Have you accomplished it?"

"Yes."

"Then now you can leave the outlaws?"

"I shall not leave the wife of Tiger Tom under any circumstances."

"Ah! then you will accept the fate of Tiger Tom and his men?"

"Yes; but now let me tell you that he has sent me to know your mission here?"

"To capture and hang him."

"Tell him that," was the stern rejoinder.

"I will do so," and Lady Jim wheeled his horse and rode away, unheeding Buck Taylor's call for him to return.

"Well, that is the strangest fellow I ever saw," said the Saddle King, as he returned to the captain and Monte Joe.

CHAPTER LXI.

THE CHALLENGE.

BUCK TAYLOR joined his two friends, who had anxiously watched his meeting with the courier, whom both had recognized as Lady Jim.

"Well, Tiger Tom sent to know why I was here on his land, and I sent back as answer that it was to capture and hang him."

"That's flatfooted enough," said Monte Joe.

"Yes, he can have no doubt now of your intention, Buck," the captain remarked.

"Then Lady Jim volunteered information which is about correct, for he said a regiment of soldiers could not take the place against the force of nearly forty men that Tiger Tom had there."

"He is right, Buck."

"Yes, sir."

"He certainly is, and strategy must do it now."

"Then I asked him, Lady Jim, what he would do, and his reply was that he would never leave the wife of Tiger Tom, and accept the fate of all."

"Then he bore my message back, and we must await the result."

The courier was seen to re-enter the stockade and to dismount at the piazza.

Then half an hour passed, when Buck Taylor said:

"He is coming back."

"But not alone."

"No, Monte Joe, Tiger Tom's wife is with him."

Down the steep trail rode the woman, mounted upon the very black which Buck Taylor had returned to her.

She rode thirty feet in advance of Lady Jim the cowboy, and as she drew nearer it was seen that she was superbly attired, her black velvet habit being embroidered in gold, as was also her sable sombrero with its heavy black plume.

"A magnificent woman indeed!" said the captain.

"I never saw a handsomer one," Monte Joe rejoined.

She bore a lance in her right hand, and as she came nearer she unrolled not a white, but a red flag from the point.

"Well, she comes for blood," muttered the Saddle King.

"Lady Jim shows the white flag," said Monte Joe, as the cowboy was seen to unroll a white flag from the lance which he now carried.

"What is it to be now?" said Buck Taylor, and he continued:

"Let her come here, for I wish you both to hear what she has to say."

The woman came on at a canter, and never drew rein until she was within twenty feet of where the Saddle King stood.

Then she reined her horse back suddenly, lowered her lance point in salute, and said in her full, melodious voice:

"We meet again, Sir Saddle King."

"I am happy to feel that we do, Mrs. Tracey," was the gallant reply.

"I desire to thank you for the return of my horse, though he was intended as a present to you."

"And I thank you for the loan of him, madam."

"My husband received your message through my cowboy attendant, sir."

"And his reply?"

"You have come here to capture him, I believe?"

"Yes, madam."

"Upon what charge, may I ask?"

"That he is Tom Trescott, a deserter from

the army, and who killed and robbed the paymaster."

"A severe charge, sir."

"A true one, and more, I accuse him of being the chief of a band of outlaws."

"Mr. Taylor, accusations are not proofs, and though, from a striking resemblance to Tom Trescott, robber, murderer and deserter, you might hang him as the man he is charged with being, you cannot bring an atom of evidence to show that he is an outlaw or in alliance with them."

"He has a number of men whom he has aided, who are his friends, and some are under his pay as cowboys, and all are here to defend him, as he felt himself in danger."

"He is my husband; this is our ranch; we have a right to defend our own and shall do so. But, as it is Tiger Tom you seek, I now come from the man you accuse of being known as Trescott, to say from him that there is no need of pitting your men against his, to bring others into the quarrel, and that as you come for him, you must be willing to face him as man to man, in a duel."

The woman spoke earnestly, and the truth of her words not only Buck Taylor, but captain Hassan and Monte Joe felt, for there was not the slightest proof against the men.

They had rescued their captain—yes, disguised as Indians; but they had not fired until he, the Saddle King had opened upon them.

He had no actual evidence that the men who ambushed him at Cave Canyon were from Tiger Tom's band.

As a ranchero, he had a right to keep what force of cowboys he wished, and to look to them to defend his home.

So it resolved itself into the capture, or surrender, of Tiger Tom alone.

That was what the Saddle King sought, of all things.

Twice had Tiger Tom escaped him, and now they were face to face for the third time.

Could he refuse such a challenge, and from Tom Trescott the Deserter, upon whose head there was a price?

No! He was not the man to do it, and so he said:

"I agree with what you say, Mrs. Tracey, about the men, and if I understand that your husband sends me a challenge to a duel, I will accept upon one condition."

"Name it."

"That if I fall, he at once leaves this country, and disbands his men."

"Well, and should he fall?"

"That I claim his body, to take it to the fort as proof of his death, and that his men also disband, except such force as you may wish to keep, should you desire to remain on your ranch."

"I shall remain, sir, under all circumstances, and I accept your conditions."

"Now to tell you that the duel is to be with lariat!"

She looked straight into the face of the Saddle King as she spoke, but without the change of an expression he said:

"I accept the terms, madame. So name time and place."

"Midway between here and the base of the hill, and with the two forces drawn up face to face to witness the duel with lassoes."

The Saddle King bowed and raised his sombrero, and the woman, with a wave of her hand, wheeled and rode away, followed by Lady Jim, the cowboy.

CHAPTER LXII.

THE DUEL WITH LASSOES.

THE SADDLE KING turned to Captain Hassan with a smile, as the woman rode away; but the smile was not reflected upon the faces of either of his comrades, and the captain said in a blunt way:

"Buck, that was a very serious mistake."

"Why so, captain?"

"That man sought to use the weapon he knows best how to handle."

"Yes, of course."

"You are an expert with the lasso, I am well aware, and bear the name of the Lasso Demon, which that man Tiger Tom knows, and yet the fact that he dares to select ropes shows that he has perfect confidence in his own skill."

"Yes, sir, and I accepted, feeling the same confidence."

"Well, I have confidence in you, and yet I would rather have seen revolvers used!"

"So would I, Buck," added Monte, "for I happen to have seen Tiger Tom use a lariat, and that was what cut him so, when you caught him with his own weapon, for he has been called the King of the Lasso, as you have of the Saddle."

"Well, the one who survives the duel will be the real King of the Rope," was Buck's reply.

Then the conversation turned upon the arguments used by the woman, and all felt that, if Tiger Tom could be taken without a fight, and that his cowboys would disband and depart, it was the best way to settle it, as there was a woman in the case.

"Well, Buck, no terms were made with me, and if your life goes out at the end of a rope, I shall turn man-hunter, and Tiger Tom will one day answer to me."

"Not until he crosses the river."

"You mean the Rio Grande, Buck?"

"Yes, Joe."

"Well, then, he'll have one more river to cross," was the gambler's answer.

They all now watched the proceedings upon the hill, the woman and Lady Jim having returned to the cabin.

She had not been long there when Lady Jim was seen to ride into view, and placing a bugle to his lips he blew the assembly.

Instantly the men on the hill were seen to mount, and Buck Taylor at once placed a silver whistle to his lips and blew a dozen shrill notes.

The call reached the ears of every cowboy, and horses were brought in, saddled and mounted, and the two further bands began to come toward where the Saddle King and his party were.

As they came up, down the hill were seen riding the cowboys from the ranch.

At their head rode Tiger Tom, and in his hand he carried the lance, with the red flag fluttering at the end.

Behind him the men rode by twos, and just thirty were counted.

"The woman has not come, and there are a group of half a dozen mounted men near the cabin," remarked Buck, using his glass for a good view.

"Yes, and Lady Jim is one of them," Monte Joe added.

Then the Saddle King sprung into his saddle, and moved to the front.

Close behind him followed Captain Hassan and Monte Joe, and behind these, by twos, rode the Lasso Legion and the cowboys from Soldier's Retreat, with the peon servant leading the pack-horses in the rear.

Word had gone down the line what the duel was to be, and many looked disappointed that there was not to be a general fight.

But there were anxious faces behind the Saddle King, though his was placid and unmoved.

He had saddled his splendid roan most carefully, had taken off his saddle-pockets and blankets, and had thrown aside his coat and belt of arms.

He had stripped for the fray, yet had one revolver concealed under the end of his silk sash in case of treachery by Tiger Tom, for he knew not what to expect from the big ruffian.

Tiger Tom had also prepared most carefully for the duel, but wore his belt of arms.

He was mounted upon a splendid snow-white horse, and certainly presented a very grand appearance, though his face was livid and vicious as Satan's.

The two men halted at a distance of fifty yards apart, and then Tiger Tom unbuckled his belt of arms and called to one of his men to take them.

Both troops looked each other squarely in the face, though they had halted about two hundred yards apart.

Not a word was spoken, but with a wave of the hand Buck Taylor rode back toward his men, Tiger Tom doing the same.

"From the center file right and left!" ordered the cowboy chief.

Captain Hassan led one file, Monte Joe the other, and the long line was formed.

"My men, I expect only fair dealing, and pit my life to capture Tiger Tom. If treachery is shown, you are man to man, so wipe them out, and use your lassoes!"

This little speech fell distinctly from the

lips of the Saddle King, and he waved his hand as a farewell to his men.

Then he wheeled his horse, dropped his right hand upon his lasso, and faced his foe.

Tiger Tom had also ridden back to his men, and what he said they alone heard.

Then he also faced about, lasso in hand.

Each eyed the other as though to measure his strength, and both antagonists were cool and collected.

The Saddle King was the first to move. He rode away to the left and in a circle.

Tiger Tom rode as slowly to his left, and thus they began to make a circle that was to become narrower and narrower.

Buck Taylor passed close to the line of Tiger Tom's men, and though he kept his eye on his foe, he yet seemed to glance into the face of each horseman as he went by, and they could not but note his utterly fearless expression on the eve of a deadly encounter.

The cowboys eyed Tiger Tom as he rode by, and all saw that his face was livid, determined and devilish in expression.

Not a word was spoken, but such a glance as Tiger Tom gave Monte Joe he long remembered.

Having ridden around in front of his own men again, Buck Taylor smiled, waved his lasso quickly around his head; wheeled and sharply spurred his noble roan and shot off toward his adversary like an arrow.

As he did so his cowboys broke out into one of their wild, terrible yells, as a cheer and a defiance.

This sudden move of the Saddle King took Tiger Tom by surprise, for it was several seconds before he had wheeled his white steed and got started toward his foe, while that cowboy yell had made his men move uneasily, and the yell was not responded to.

But, Tiger Tom uttered a war-cry so full of hate and fury, that it revealed how thoroughly his whole life, hopes and all were cast upon that one meeting.

As they neared each other the Saddle King suddenly rose in his stirrups, his lasso whirling, and at that instant Tiger Tom cast his coil, for he had expected the Saddle King's lariat to leave his hand.

But, the spurs sunk deep into the flanks of the roan; then a wrench on the bit, and the animal as on a pivot was wheeled to one side, while, lying flat on his saddle the noose struck and slid harmlessly over all. Yet quicker than a word could be spoken the Lasso Demon, upright in saddle, with one mighty whirl sent his deadly coil through the air!

As though sure of his aim, the spurs sunk deep again into the obedient roan's flanks; another wheel, like lightning, and he bounded away; while there came a loud *twang* as the lasso became taut, and Tiger Tom was dragged from his saddle with terrific force.

The Saddle King was the victor.

A half dozen bounds only had the roan made, when he was reined sharply back upon his haunches, and amid the wild yells of the Cowboy League, the Lasso Demon sprung to the side of his fallen foe.

Then, up rose his hand—a signal for silence—and loud rung his voice:

"Silence all! He is dead!"

CHAPTER LXIII.

AT BAY.

WITH one accord, the moment that they saw their leader fall, the men from Old Mission Ranch wheeled their horses and rode like the wind back toward the hill.

The Cowboy League would have followed them, but Buck Taylor called them to a halt.

"Wait, men! if they break their terms, no mercy shall be shown them."

"Bide your time!"

There was no exultation in his tone, and he checked the cheers of his men, while he silently received the congratulations of Captain Hassan and Monte Joe.

Then Captain Hassan walked up to the giant form of Tiger Tom.

The well-trained roan still held his position, one end of the lariat around the saddle-horn, the other about the neck of Tiger Tom.

Stooping by his side, Captain Hassan laid his hand upon his pulse.

It had ceased to beat.

Then he placed his ear flat to the broad breast over his heart.

It, too, was stilled.

Next he raised the head.

"Loosen the lariat, for he is stone-dead."

"His neck was broken," he said.

The order was obeyed, and taking from his pocket a leather wallet, he handed it to Buck Taylor, who requested the captain to open it.

"There is but this slip of paper in it," and unfolding it, he read aloud:

"I am Thomas Trescott, robber, murderer and deserter from the United States Army."

"I deserve my fate, to die at the end of a rope; but spare my wife, for she is innocent, and those who befriended me, my men, are only guilty of being true to their friendship, their vows to a Secret League, but not a lawless one, for it was formed for self-protection."

TIGER TOM.

Such was the communication from the dead.

His confession and condemnation after death.

"Captain Hassan?"

"Yes, Buck."

"There is a reward of five thousand dollars on the head of this man, dead or alive."

"Yes."

"You can swear to his death?"

"Yes, Buck."

"And you Monte Joe?"

"I certainly can."

"Then, Captain Hassan, I leave it to you to collect the reward and distribute it equally among the brave boys now here with me, for not one cent of it can I, would I, take."

"But the body I do claim, and now that he is dead my enmity is gone, and be he what he was, all that his confession makes him, his wife loved him, and shall have the satisfaction at least of placing him in his grave."

"Monte Joe?"

"Yes, Buck."

"Will you take the horse there that has not deserted him, and have half a dozen men bear the body of Tiger Tom to his widow?"

"Indeed I will, Buck, and you are the manliest of men to do as you do now," was the earnest reply.

The horse was led forward, and eight cowboys formed a litter with their rifles and straps, and the body was placed upon it, Captain Hassan folding the hands over the massive breast.

"See here, Buck," and he held up his left hand.

"Yes, the Star and Tiger brand, captain."

Then the lance was placed beside him, the red flag covering the face, and taking up their load the cowboys bore it on after Monte Joe who led the dead giant's horse.

The little party had not gone far before they saw that there was trouble at the ranch.

There at the stockade gate stood the wife of Giant Tom, and in each hand she held a revolver.

By her side was Lady Jim, and behind him were Si Dunn, Doc Barney and two other cowboys, and they held their rifles ready.

The woman had seen the duel from the piazza of her home, had seen her husband fall, and then had turned away.

But instantly she was recalled by a cry from Lady Jim.

"The men are stampeding for the ranch!"

"They shall not do it!"

"They shall stick to the conditions!"

"Come!"

And she ran toward the stockade gate, followed by those she had chosen to remain on the ranch, should her husband fall.

At the stockade gate she stood at bay, closing it as they came up the steep path.

"Back, men, all of you!"

"You shall not enter here, for that breaks the conditions, and they shall be kept."

"Back or I will open fire, and if I do I will call yonder Saddle King and his men to aid me!"

They had drawn up at the gate, and now sought to parley, one claiming that the Cowboy League would massacre them.

"You are men, and equal them in numbers."

"No, you must go your separate ways."

"If you are ever in want I am ready to help you, and if I need you I will send for you."

"Men, you must go, for the compact I

made with the Saddle King shall not be broken.

"Go!"

The men saw that she was in earnest, and glancing back over the prairie they beheld the little *cortege* coming, and that the Lasso League were not pursuing them.

So they bade farewell to the woman and rode back down the hill, turning right and left as they reached the prairie and going off in couples, trios and several in squads of four and five.

CHAPTER LXIV.

CONCLUSION.

Up the steep trail went Monte Joe, leading Tiger Tom's horse, and followed by the cowboy bearers of the body.

The woman saw their approach, and instinctively she knew what the Saddle King had done.

She waited and met the men, and taking off his hat, Monte Joe told her why he had come.

Her lips quivered, her glorious eyes filled with tears for the first time, and she said in a low tone:

"Tell him that I say God bless my noble free

"It is all I can say.

"And you, sir, I thank, and you," and she bowed low before Monte Joe and the cowboy bearers of the body.

They placed it upon a cot in the cabin and then turned away, Lady Jim escorting them and walking by Monte Joe's side.

"Do you not see that you could not have taken this place?" he asked.

"Yes, it is as strong as a fortress."

"It was better so."

"Far better; but what will you do?"

"Shall I tell you in confidence?"

"Yes. I will so receive it."

"Long ago I ran off to sea, and I came back to find one man had ruined my home.

"That man was the one who lies dead in yonder cabin.

"Valerie, his wife, is my sister, and she was fascinated by him, never knowing how he had destroyed all we loved to get their fortune, through her.

"I turned avenger; but I could never find my sister, for no one knew that she dwelt here.

"Tiger Tom I found, allied myself to him, and when I found where he had hidden Valerie, I intended to kill him.

"The Saddle King saved me from taking his life, and only when he rode out to meet that brave young Texan did I tell Valerie who I was.

"To the Saddle King, and to Captain Hassan, to whom I owe more than any gratitude can ever repay, tell my story, but to no one else.

"Good-by."

Monte Joe grasped his hand and Lady Jim wheeled quickly and returned to the ranch.

When the little party joined their comrades upon the prairie, the order was to mount and away, and while the cowboys from Soldier's Retreat returned to their home, Captain Hassan and Monte Joe went on with the Saddle King and his gallant twelve to Fort D—.

Arriving there Colonel Miles, an old comrade of Captain Hassan, heard the story of the deserter's death, and an order was given for the payment of the reward, which was divided among the twelve lasso-throwers and the men from Soldier's Retreat, the ranchero taking their share to his men, and Monte Joe accompanying him.

As for the gambler he returned to Trail Crossing, and still played cards for the fortune he eventually accumulated, though it was not through gambling, I may say, as he became a ranchero after realizing that he was throwing his life away.

The dwellers in Soldier's Retreat went on in the even tenor of their way, Belle Hassan refusing many a good offer, as she said she would only marry one who came up to her idea of a perfect man.

And from the day of his duel with Tiger Tom, Buck Taylor became known as the Lasso Demon, while the adventures in the years that followed, form the theme of other romances which go to prove how much more strange Truth is than Fiction.

THE END.

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